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The Obama Effect and Its Relationship to the Perceptions of Blacks on Education and Social Mobility

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE OBAMA EFFECT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO THE PERCEPTIONS OF
BLACKS ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
PROGRAM IN CULTURAL EDUCATION AND SOCIAL POLICY

BY
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ABSTRACT

The educational system in the United States has been characterized as political, a meritocracy (Hurn, 1992), a structure that socializes citizens (Warren, 1996), a system that marginalized those of races marked other or defined as minority by society (Ratvich, 1983; West, 1993; Katz, 1999) and, most importantly for this study, the key to a more equitable society through schooling and personal beliefs and the possibility of lifelong achievement (Anderson, 1988). Our educational system, ever changing and complicated by definition and action, plays a large role in one's perception of the ability of people to achieve social mobility (Lipman, 2004). Through student and faculty interviews this study seeks to determine an understanding of how personal perceptions of race and education have an impact on their understanding of social mobility. Furthermore, this study is interested in understanding whether those perceptions of social mobility have changed as a result of the election of President Obama.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEMATIC BELIEF IN SOCIAL MOBILITY

The educational system in the United States has been characterized as political, a meritocracy (Hurn, 1992), a structure that socializes citizens (Warren, 1996), a system that marginalizes those of races marked other or defined as minority by society (Ratvich, 1983; West, 1993; Katz, 1999) and, most importantly for this study, the key to a more equitable society through schooling and personal beliefs in the possibility of lifelong achievement (Anderson, 1988). Our educational system, ever changing and complicated by definition and action, plays a large role in one's perception of people to achieve social mobility -- especially for marginalized populations (Lipman, 2004). It is important to understand that there is a historical connection between social mobility, race, and education when discussing how Black people perceive the impact of the first Black President, Barack Obama. This historical connection creates a foundation for understanding Black's perceptions (Anderson, 1988).

In this study, the ability to believe it is possible to achieve a higher "status" or a better life and achieve the so-called "better" is defined as social mobility. Throughout history, common discourse explains that through education people should be more socially mobile; unfortunately these findings are not consistently true for poor minorities (Yang, 2006). This study wants to examine Black perception of social mobility, so to hear the voices of those who are categorized as being less socially mobile

(Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the term “success” was used when asking participants about their perceptions of mobility. Although the concepts of success and social mobility are different, success defined individually by the participants, and social mobility a concept describing actual social and educational attainment (Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005) success was used in the interviews to get at perceptions of social mobility. Success was more easily understood by participants in the study, especially the student participants. Through the participant’s definition of success, their perception of social mobility can be understood. This social mobility study focuses on *perceived* Black’s, experiences in public schooling and, most importantly, how the election of President Barack Obama has affected one’s perception of social mobility.

The focus of this study lies in the perceptions that Blacks have as it relates to educational and personal attainment a year after the election of the first Black president. Social mobility is complex because of the numerous factors that play into its meaning (Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005). The idea of social mobility for Blacks is affected by common discourse that questions education as an institution of learning or an institution of marginalization, not only that but inquires if society is a free democracy or an oppressive racist state (Lipman, 2004). Even furthermore, there is a discussion as to the historical significance of education and its ties to social mobility. These factors affect Black social mobility because this common discourse is part of what creates perceptions and beliefs among people and, inevitably, history is what helps form our understanding of today (Anderson, 1988; Perry, 1993).

Perry (1993) discusses how the failures of African Americans in schools today contradict with the history of education and African Americans during slavery and through the Reconstruction era. For centuries, Blacks had been denied the right to read and write. This constant denial of learning during slavery and even after was a tactic used by Whites to keep Blacks in a constant state of intellectual inferiority, which worked to maintain the discrepancies between Blacks and Whites (Anderson, 1988; Perry 1993). This historical denial and persistent struggle of Blacks to achieve a better existence through education does not match the continual failures and the academic achievement gap that exists between Black and White students in school and in society today (Perry, 1993; Lipman, 2004). This history requires one to reexamine structures of schooling and how they are tied to social mobility and, more specifically, how Blacks perceive achievement through schooling.

Not only must one reexamine the structures of schooling to explore social mobility, one must explore how motivation plays a role within these structures and in the minds of Black students. How do Black people feel about schooling and achieving social mobility as a result of their schooling? Are Blacks motivated to succeed? Why and how are Black's motivated? Do Black's see a positive future through education? Although the structures of schooling exist how do Black's view school and do they believe schooling is the key to a life of prosperity? Then finally, now that Barack Obama is our first Black president, do Black's perceive their future differently? Do Blacks feel more or less motivated in school and/or life as a result of Obama's election?

There are many statistics tied to education and social mobility, especially within institutions of higher learning (Nettles and Perna, 1997). On average, Blacks are more likely to receive financial aid than Whites, are more likely to have lower family incomes than Whites, more likely to be in the lowest quarter of American socioeconomic status *after* they receive their bachelor's degrees, and are almost three times as likely to have incomes below \$20,000 as compared to their White peers (Nettles and Perna, 1997). Also, in general, employers prefer white male workers to women and minority workers because white males have better job commitment, moral, and productivity (Yang, 2007). This is startling, because minorities do not have a mental deficit; this requires one to examine structures that are supposed to promote social mobility (Bell, 1987). Not only that, these statistics reminds us of the disparities and inequities between Blacks and Whites, and forces us to question the possibility of motivation when it comes to social mobility and achievement.

How can Blacks motivate themselves to achieve more in a school system where the message preached is one of a meritocracy? Not only that, but a message ignoring structural barriers to success while statistics continually remind those who do reach a higher level of education that they are "less" than their White counterparts? If school is the route to social mobility, how can Blacks travel that route when education continues to deny a sense of equity in achievement before, after and during their schooling experience? How do statistics like the ones above create and perpetuate common discourse within both Black and White communities, and how does this discourse shape Black perceptions of the possibility of social mobility?

Unfortunately, study after study shows small improvements in the forms of upward mobility for Blacks and other minorities. They state that, in general, the trend seems to require minorities to exchange cultural conformity, or assimilate to the dominant group, for upward mobility. This does not seem popular for many minorities, because of the importance and history of cultural ties (Snipp and Hirschman, 2005). Related to this study, it is important to note that race does matter (West, 1993; Snipp and Hirschman, 2005). The idea that all who participates in societal structures like schooling have an equal opportunity is false. Merit based achievement is only the ideal. For many other factors influence social mobility, including issues of class, and most importantly here, race.

The voices of marginalized Blacks have been ignored or silenced which has affected many educational policies and decisions that are constantly made in our society (West, 1993; Lipman, 2004); this specifically relates to the school systems and particularly how public schools affect perceptions social mobility. This said, because many argue that schooling is necessary, and in some cases the only path for people to improve their lives, schooling as a political structure teaches our children, in many cases, politically engrained ideologies that either motivate or marginalize their perceptions of “achievement” (Warren, 1996). This political foundation inevitably creates a relationship between schooling and social mobility. It is important then, that the voices who are most marginalized are heard so to create a structure of schooling that is most effective for them. Additionally, a demonstrated commitment to giving voice to these marginalized voices will provide insight about what motivates and drives their perceptions of success.

There are many ideologies such as a meritocracy that leave out critical factors which affect social mobility, including issues of race, class, education, and distribution of power in the United States (Hurn, 1992). Using “colorblind” theories or ignoring the effects of this capitalist society and power relations, ignore many factors that influence one’s perceived ability to achieve social mobility (Lewis, 2001).

Because race is a constant reminder and divider among people -- Black being the inferior, White the superior -- in political structures such as schools, in the work place, and in areas of living, the idea of social mobility and what it takes to achieve mobility is complex (West, 1993; Lipman, 2004). Not only is social mobility complex, it is contextual because social mobility varies among individuals due to diverse sources of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Hurn, 1992; Warren, 1996). There also tends to be trends related to social mobility among racial groups because of a common history (Anderson, 1988; Ogbu, 1991).

As stated, many factors are attributed to one’s belief about social mobility: whether structural or perceived or a combination of both. This study hopes to discover how Blacks in Chicago perceived their own social mobility before the election of our first Black President, Barack Obama, and how, if at all, that perception changed after his election in 2008. This study also seeks to explain if and how public schooling plays a role in personal beliefs on social mobility.

From this qualitative inquiry, this study looks forward to peeling away the complicated layers of education, race, and its history to hear the “voices” of Black people in their self-professed triumphs and failures throughout their lives. With these voices

comes a more developed picture of society, including how structures and policies are connected to social mobility. This study hopes to push people to critically question their own perceptions and to more specifically reveal an understanding of Blacks and their perceptions of mobility. Finally, this study wants to motivate change and work to improve society's structures and policies so that the idea of "doing better" is not unattainable, but available to everyone.

With President Obama's historic election comes many questions; questions about if his new status as the commander and chief of the United States of America, and his "Blackness," affects others who are also perceived as Black and their views of personal, social mobility in the United States. These notions are important for one's understanding of society and their place in it as well as their ability to change it (Freire, 1970; Dixon and Rousseau, 2005). Also, in this study both the words Black and White will be capitalized to recognize that more than a color lies behind these words, but also a history of perceived racial status created and perpetuated by society (Anderson, 1988, Lipman, 2004).

For many centuries, those perceived as Black in the United States have had to mentally and physically struggle in order to achieve; an 'achievement' created and defined by our social system (West, 1993). This sense of achievement defined by participant perception about their academic accomplishments, economic status, and social status; is related to being Black. This then is tied to ones perceived belief in *their* possibility and opportunity for social mobility. According to West, being Black in the United States automatically, because of historical inequities, allows for continual

suffering as racial inequities are fueled by stereotypes (West, 1993). West (1993) argues that because of both liberal and conservative discourse we “fail to see that the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*” (West, 1983, p. 6). In other words, it is important to understand the “flaws” of “American society” before we begin with the problems of the Black race.

To understand the current state of Black and White race relations as it affects society in the United States and its relationship with social mobility, one must understand the complex racial history that created our social system through government policies and laws. Beginning in the 1600s with the chains of Slavery and Blacks as property, Whites established themselves as the dominant class in this country. By the mid-1800s, Southern ‘Black Codes’ prohibited Blacks from voting and sitting on juries. Such policies led to the 1873 Supreme Court decisions which inevitably nullified the civil rights legislation of the Reconstruction-era by ignoring, and reinterpreting Black citizenship (Anderson, 1988). This ushered in an era starting in 1887 when Jim Crow, the use of intimidation tactics and violence towards Blacks to maintain comprehensive racial segregation (Anderson, 1988), was in full effect. These policies strictly enforced segregation in many facets of daily life including schooling, higher education, and employment (Anderson, 1988). The doctrine of *separate but equal* was secured in public schooling by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (Anderson, 1988), until it was overthrown in 1954 by *Brown v. Board of Education* which ruled that school segregation was psychologically harmful to Blacks and their communities. Thus this forced integration, which for many people was

detrimental in mind and spirit (Green, 2004). These policies, all historically momentous, have created a sense of Blacks as “them” or “other” (West, 1993). This “other” mentality whether forced by law and as racial segregation, or just the reminiscence of a discordant racial history, has led to a racially divided country.

So, then what happens when a man perceived as Black is elected to the highest office of the land? How does this landmark election affect Black people’s ideas of personal social mobility? Does the landmark election of 2008, in which the first Black president of the United States, President Barack Hussein Obama change the discourse and ideologies of social mobility and Blackness? Did this election affect Black people’s perception of social mobility and its relationship to schooling?

The landmark policies discussed above, helped create the path to the election of President Obama; they have contributed to our present educational structure, our social structure (West, 1993), and the discourse and ideologies that define race within these structures. This history created the realities of *our* today and by recognizing this, it is more plausible to understand these realities (Anderson, 1988), as they were created and defined as the state in which our children are being “educated” in the United States. Importantly, this study will inquire into the lives of Black people and analyze their perceptions of survival and “success” as it relates to their formal education before and after the election of President Barack Obama.

Through common discourse, as discussed and critiqued by Stone (1972), many contend that there have been improvements with education and social mobility of Blacks because of the “integration” of schools in *Brown v. Board*, as well as the legal

termination of slavery and the discriminatory practices and laws like Jim Crow and *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Many also argue that the United States is not as racist as it once was (Stone, 1972). Added to this is the fact that newly elected President, Barack Obama, is Black. Does this not prove that tension and conflict between races is no more and upward mobility is possible for all?

Many might contest this “conversation” arguing that there is modern day slavery in this hegemonic society, where dominant culture, through “color-blind” policies and laws create in-school segregation (through tracking and grouping etc.), and segregated cities, which continue to perpetuate inequities between schools and school districts (Ravitch, 1983; Staiger, 2006). For example, according to Diane Ravitch (1983) after a “legal attack” of Plessy’s “separate but equal” school systems, a process she notes as slow and violent, the “color-blind” goals of the civil rights movement, including the push for integration, were soon viewed as racism in a new form because “massive problems remained” which perpetuated disparities in schools as well as in society from years of racial inequity (Ravitch, 1983, p. 6).

Because of the debate mentioned above, this study is qualitative in nature, utilizing interviews in order to compare perceptions of social mobility before and after the election of President Barack Obama. These perceptions, uncovered and written as stories, will be compared to each other to examine improvements, or the lack thereof with one’s perceived ability to achieve some sort of social mobility. Through storytelling interviews, the voices of those deeply impacted, by being born Black and therefore “*other*.” Their stories will tell how the election of the first Black president has impacted

their perceptions of social mobility. These stories will be interpreted so to determine their “level” of social mobility (success), as measured by their perception and definition of success, including but not limited to personal, academic success, income, work opportunities, and their quality of life.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, there has been little scholarly research on the perceptions of social mobility among Blacks after President Obama's election in 2008. This research hopes to find how the image of a Black man, as president, affects how Blacks perceive their future and how that relates to their schooling. There have been articles, including one in the New York Times that discusses the "Obama Effect" on test-taking scores. The "Obama Effect" is a term used to describe how Obama has positively affected certain aspects of our current society including the economy, politics, and education. Does this mean, as many believe, that his image is changing the perceptions that people have about Blacks and the perceptions Blacks have about themselves? In this research the "Obama Effect" will only be used concerning its relationship to education to education.

The study mentioned above consisted of 84 Blacks and 388 Whites in 2007, where they were administered a test of twenty questions. On average, Whites answered twelve out of twenty questions correctly, whereas Blacks answered only 8.5 out of twenty correctly. Then again in 2008, this test was administered directly after President Obama's acceptance speech. This time, the gap between races was "statistically insignificant." Many people associate this phenomenon with a belief that Black people have been saying "we can," but now actually seeing the realities of this truth in Obama, are creating change in their own personal beliefs and motivation to academically succeed

(Study Sees an Obama Effect as Lifting Black Test-Takers, 2009; Is There an ‘Obama Effect’ on Standardized Test Scores?, 2009) In addition to the article discussed above there are several scholarly journals and books that discuss president Obama’s rise to presidency, and his leadership skills, as well as issues of race. But for social mobility, there are few.

This study will expound on perceptions of social mobility before and after Obama’s election. The educational gap between races is real, and closely related to motivation and success, as society defines schooling as a means to be vertically mobile. It is important for all people, especially those whose voices have been oppressed, to have the same educational opportunity as those who have not been traditionally marginally oppressed throughout their schooling experience. This research hopes to begin the important discussion of perceptions of social mobility as they relate to education and race in this country.

This research will investigate issues of equity in terms of race and racism, and how that intertwines with academic achievement and social mobility. This study defines racism by combining two definitions, one introduced by Banks in 1981, and Stovall’s definition, introduced in 1996, as issues of “color” and power that continue to be conceptualized within society. Racism is not merely a color issue, but has to do with the collective actions of a dominant racial group. No matter whether this power is “displayed” purposely, or if it exists through historical policies, if it continues to perpetuate and reflect the uneven dynamics between the dominant culture and the oppressed, it is racism (Banks, 1981). This is evidenced in law, housing, and health

care. Together, both realities define racism. Racism in this context is not defined as an individual racial prejudice, but a system's use of power and privilege, thus a "limiting of power and privilege" to the oppressed and marginalized (Banks, 1981). Stovall (1996) contends that there is a relationship between race and class in that the two are connected essential to understanding academic success and social mobility. Both race and class are necessary components when discussing social mobility. Both are necessary components so both will be addressed in this research.

Furthermore, when discussing social mobility, it is common to immediately associate it with academic success, which in many cases is highly related, but this study does not define achievement relating only to academic success through traditional means. One should understand that this definition of achievement is not referring to a simple standard and/or test through "traditional schooling," but is referring to personal gains (which vary in description) made over time. Hence this study's emphasis is on personal perceptions of social mobility.

In this study, social mobility, as mentioned before, refers to "measured perceptions of personal and academic success," "income level," "work opportunities," and overall perceived "quality of life." "Academic success" refers to the respondents' school experience and their perception of "school life," as a ladder leading to the next phases in their life. "Income level" is the amount of money the respondent makes and their personal feelings about this amount. "Available work opportunities" refers to the number of available jobs in their skill level and/or their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their current position, and the overall perceived "quality of life" refers to any situation

they feel as remarkable and necessary in their life story. These perceived notions by Blacks of social mobility will be recorded during an interview. This study will ask questions of Blacks' perceptions before and after President Obama's election and then, inevitably, comparisons will be made between the dominant class in order to help frame a social understanding of this research.

It is necessary to point out that in this research project race is understood as a "political creation" for the agenda of the dominant culture (Stone, 1972). This creation is important in the conceptualization of "color" differences in society because of the necessity of race as a label within our society. Race as a political creation is a big part of what defines people's perceptions of themselves and others and how that impacts their role or place in a given society.

Within this research paper the word Black is used to describe the interviewees and President Obama, because the term Black is universal (in the United States) in terms of understanding the ancestry and history tied to Black as a race. Any people of color who perceives themselves as Black and/or thinks others perceive them-as Black are included in the population. On the other hand, any person who perceives themselves as Caucasian/White and any person who thinks society perceive them as White is considered a member of the dominant class. This differentiation is defined because sometimes there is a difference between the ethnic and racial perceptions that people assign to others and the actual accepted racial group to which a given person expresses his or her belonging. It is impossible to ignore people's perceptions, and this study cannot ignore society's racially constructed categories.

This study recognizes the realities that people live in because of the politically created lines that divide people based on racial stereotyped characteristics. This allows for those who fall in the multiracial category to be able to speak their perceptions, even if and *because* society labels and puts them in the Black or White category. Although Black or White will be used to define those who are multiracial, it is merely because of the need for clarity in explaining the research. If a multiracial person is interviewed or discussed in this paper, their socially perceived race as well as their expressed and personally accepted race, or the race(s) they prescribe to (if they do) will be expressed in the analysis of the interview.

In sum, race is something that can transcend “color” and should not only be based on personal perceptions, but also on the interactions people have that cause feelings of being “race labeled.” In other words, this study includes people who because of certain characteristics feel victim to being labeled and treated according to that label. For example, Barack Obama, although of mixed racial ancestry, (his father Barack Obama Sr., is Kenyan, and his mother, Ann Dunham, is White) is perceived as Black. His perceived Blackness combined with his new role as president is momentous because he is considered the first Black president, whether he really perceives himself as Black or not.

The concept of Black might seem extremely problematic. First, are there any true dimensions to being Black, or is it just another label created by dominant discourse, as a political tool for dominant agendas? Second, what truly is Black? What is White? Third, how are these labels helping or hurting society? And what role does culture play in defining it? This idea has created several more questions rather than answering the initial

one. It is clear to see that Black is a created concept, but for who, and why? The term “Black” is used advisedly throughout this study. Because it is such a generalization, in this study it is used strictly because of common usage and worldly understanding of its definition.

This study will use Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is based on five tenants pertinent to understanding the dynamics of the research. These tenants include the belief that racism is endemic in society; the belief that dominant ideologies about race should be challenged; an emphasis on a commitment to social justice; the recognition of the importance of narrative and voice of the oppressed; and finally the realization of the importance of an interdisciplinary perspective (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1998). These tenants will help shape and form the analysis by using storytelling interviews. CRT believes in the importance of voice, critical thinking, and a consciousness of injustice, and that racial relations are important to improving our society (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Throughout this study the five tenants mentioned above will be used to create a cohesive framework.

CRT was pioneered by people in the legal field; most notably Derrick Bell in the late 1970's. Bell (1987) and others were and still are extremely concerned with racial reform in the United States. Bell (1987) felt there was little if any progress towards actual racial reform and was critical of traditional Civil Rights discourse (Tate, 1996). He argued that Whites would only support advances in the Black community if those advances were in the interests of Whites. CRT was then used by the likes of Ladson-

Billings (1998) in the Educational field leading to a great deal of research on how this theory might affect students/people during and after formal “schooling.”

With CRT as a framework for this study, issues of race will be at the forefront when discussing social mobility. CRT will be not only the foundation for the study, but will help in the understanding of why this study is conducted in this particular manner. In other words, with the understanding of CRT, one can see the connection between the chosen methods of interviews in the storytelling manner, why “voice” is stressed (especially that of the oppressed), and why this voice needs to be heard. The voices of Blacks, and their perceptions of social mobility are valuable in creating educational policies and a societal foundation that understands the complexity of social mobility or success (defined by society) in the United States, a country now defined increasingly by its multiculturalism (Greene, 1992).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This research is qualitative in nature. Ten Black Chicagoans, including five students of high school age, and five adults, twenty-one years or older will be interviewed. The methods used in this research study will take a “problem-centered approach.” This wording is appropriate because as coined by Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), this approach employs a ‘by any means necessary’ approach to address the problems of inequities in education, (Matsuda et al., 1993) which are so blatant in Chicago, specifically between races and classes. So with the research findings and listening to the voices of those marginalized (Warren, 1996), people will be inspired to be change agents so as to address the current problems, and praise the progress (although always critiquing and questioning).

The interviewees were selected simply. The first five freshman students who are currently attending a small school on the Southside of Chicago, Illinois, during the 2010 – 2011 school years, which turned in their parent/guardian waiver form and signed the student assent form, were selected and interviewed. The first five adult personal, who also work at this school, and who gave their assent to participate in this study were selected to participate. These two populations were defined as such: 1) school personnel (not just teachers) who perceive themselves as Black 2) and high school freshman students, who perceive themselves as Black, (who have never had me as a teacher.)

Through this process, the interview questions sought to find trends and relationships between interviewee perceptions, if there were any to be found. These interviews were done informally and with the interviewee's approval, they were recorded so to interpret and transcribe correctly. Interviews varied in length, but the majority of interviews did not exceed one hour.

During the transcribing process, each interviewee was assigned an "ID" related to their position at this school, as well as a number. The number is consistent throughout this research, and used to keep the identity of the participants confidential. For example, students will be tagged as Student 1, Student 2, and so on. Adults will be tagged as Adult, and then a number. For example, throughout this research all adult participants will be denoted as Adult 1, Adult 2, and so on.

The interviews were conducted in a storytelling manner, meaning the participants were able to express their feelings through personal stories about experiences in their lives. Participants were asked specific questions on their definition of success and how it relates to social mobility, and their experience and perception of schooling as a Black person. The purpose of the interviews is to get a better understanding of the interviewees' perception before and after President Obama was elected in 2008. This information was valuable because this study seeks to find trends within the perceptions of Black high school freshman students (of all abilities), with Blacks from an older generation. This information can help show progression, digression, or stagnation with Black perceptions of social mobility. As discussed in CRT, it is important to hear the stories of these Black interviewees because it is their reality, and their reality is a large

part of the public school system in the United States, and more specifically Chicago, Illinois. Ten questions or more were asked of each participant, depending on level of understanding between adults and students, the questions were worded appropriately. Follow-up questions were also asked depending on answers if there was a need for more clarity. Because of the nature of these storytelling interviews, questions do vary. Not all questions are worded exactly the same or asked in the same order, in essence, their testimonies guide the interview. Throughout Chapter 4, each adult interview is analyzed intermittently throughout their interview; the majority of the student interviews will have an analysis at the end of each interview.

The process in which interviewees were selected was purely based on which students brought back the parent/guardian form and signed their assent form first. These students are current freshman during this 2010-2011 school years. After the process of interviewing and recording, transcribing, and analyzing, all audio will be destroyed so to protect the individuals rights of confidentiality.

This study desires to be scholarly, but is also “readable” by the majority, if not all of the interviewees and other interested people because the purpose of this study is to help create a new dialogue about schooling, social mobility and success, so to encourage Black youth and make schooling more appropriate for the masses in which it teaches.

The actual interviews were directly transcribed from the digital voice recorder on to my personal laptop; from there each interview was read and analyzed thus making it easier to sift out trends. The interpretations and conclusions were transcribed based on the interviewees’ testimonies – using CRT as the theoretical framework. As these

interviews were interpreted, perceptions of social mobility before and after the election of Barack Obama will be categorized in the following areas: personal and academic success, and overall perceived quality of life. Each of these categories will then be analyzed as either positive, neutral, or a negative perception based on their explanation and personal experiences with success.

This study consists of four chapters. The first chapter focuses on social mobility and barriers that affect social mobility. Chapter two focuses on prior and relevant literature to help create a solid foundation for this research, chapter four explains the methodology used in the study as well as the limitations. Chapter four goes in-depth - getting to know the participants through their testimonies, and then analyzing their experiences using CRT as a framework. Here the focus is on participant voice; where they come from and their beliefs about schooling. Through their stories, this study will explore the perceived affects that President Obama's position has had on their beliefs about formal schooling and life. This chapter will also explore individual ideas about success, and feelings about social mobility before and after President Obama's 2008 election. Also in this chapter, more questions are asked as tools to continually question social norms, while looking to the future and working for equitable change in society, especially the structure of schooling.

Throughout the interview process there were reoccurring themes expressed through the experiences of the interviewees. The majority of the themes had to do with the idea of the United States being a meritocracy, family involvement and encouragement being more influential in school "success" than the structure of schooling or Barack

Obama's presidency, Barack Obama's presidency as a general motivator and source of hope, feeling Barack Obama's election was a surprise not because of his inability to be Head of State, but because "America" defined loosely, was not ready for his Blackness, good grades being synonymous with success, and consistent non-changing feelings about success before and after the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

Any project, even one this small in size, will face limitations. The most obvious limitation of this study is the small participant pool. The Black voice varies in opinion and cannot be generalized into one voice (Green, 1992). Throughout this study, there are a lot of commonalities, but that does not create space to ignore the voices that do not follow these commonalities. It would have been impossible to interview everyone who perceived themselves as Black, so I choose to take a random sample from a high school. This school allows students from all over the city of Chicago to attend. There is an application to attend this school, but it is a lottery system so there are many students who come from a variety of neighborhoods allowing room for students who have had varying experiences to attend.

It is necessary to reiterate that because the sample size is small, there will be some questions as to its validity. Having a larger population is desirable, but not realistic for the time and purpose of this study. The purpose is to hear the perceptions of some Blacks in Chicago and hopefully this will continue a dialogue in schools and various communities about social mobility.

Another limitation to this study includes the question of its validity because of its qualitative/problem centered (Matsuda, et al, 1993) approach to research. Also, because,

as stated in CRT, the creation of ideologies, epistemologies, methodologies, all should be questioned and critiqued before subscribing to their methods. This research, even with its CRT framework, must subscribe to traditional and dominant methods even when *critiquing* dominant discourse and the “traditional” norms. There are limitations created by the conflict between traditional discourse and the fundamental ideologies that go with CRT. This is recognized, but the methods required for research studies are currently within a “traditional” framework, so people are able to “read and respect” this work. This study must, be written and studied in that traditional way. This research, although not completely succumbing to “traditional norms,” still emphasizes listening to marginalized voices and storytelling. Also, related to issues of validity, one might question the process of analysis and interpretation because of the necessity to interpret other people’s perceptions.

To that end, all participants will be reassured that their identity will be kept in confidence. No names will be used to protect the privacy of those who choose to participate.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

Adult participants

Three teachers and two “non-teaching” adults in the school were the first adults to show interest in participating in this study. Each adult’s position will be kept confidential. On average, this group of adults is educated, all having a bachelor’s degree or more. All the interviewees were able to read, they did not require interpretation. All educational levels were given the opportunity to participate but those chosen were first come first serve. The adult participants interviewed, as their role as interviewee, are now able to help create a reliable study on social mobility and how Obama’s election has affected a variety of Blacks in the Black community. The adult participants who were interviewed come from diverse backgrounds. Throughout the interviewing process the experiences each interviewee had growing up varied, yet they all ended up working, in some capacity, in a high school on the Southside of Chicago. When asked to describe her background, Adult 1 said,

I grew up in an upper middle class, Black town...I grew up with my father who was an engineer, and my mother is a professor. Most of my aunts and uncles were educated, so I basically grew up in an educated loving family.

Adult one discussed having a close loving family that values education and who they themselves are educated. This is interesting because when asked about her background, she immediately spoke of education. This in itself is powerful because

through her experiences a value in education has been passed down and modeled through role models in her parents; as well as in her community. Adult 1 is defined by being formally educated.

With such an apparent value in schooling, when asked her involvement in school, there was little surprise when she stated,

I was very involved, I was on the student council, I was a cheerleader, I was on the tennis team, I did Key Club, was involved in the National Honor's Society, as well as doing things outside of school that were connected to school like working with agencies to lead discussions on specific topics, and stuff like that.

Adult 1 was extremely involved in high school. While speaking she was smiling, and laughing. Adult 1, enjoyed high school and was truly apart of a community of Black elite in the classroom and out. As expressed earlier, a part of her being was defined by being formal educated. This is what her family expected, and she too expected to use education as the catalyst in to her future. There was never a question in Adult 1's mind that she would not continue to be a part of the Black elite in Virginia, and in the United States. In answering the questions, please define success in your own words, and are you successful now, based on your definition of success, she combined her answer and said,

I think I'm successful because I think I am living my full potential, everything I can do with my abilities. It's not directly tied to money, but it kind of is, because I am getting compensated for my skills. I've pretty much reached all of my education and career goals...

As a follow up, she was asked to give examples of her goals, she discussed doing what she loves and making most of her income from what she loves doing.

I always wanted to be a writer for a living and I actually make almost all of my income from writing, I am a freelance writer for different...agencies. I am doing something that I think gives back and not necessarily for the paycheck, and that is teachers. So um, so I feel like I have balanced out both parts.

Here there is some discussion of money and its relationship to success, out of all ten interviews, Adult 1 is the only participant who expressed money as a factor, though small in defining success.

In college, Adult 1 was just as involved as she was in high school or even more so, and she was surrounded by a group of self-proclaimed elite driven Black individuals. She is a member of a popular historically Black sorority, as well as consistently being academically challenged in her college courses. Adult 1 moved on to pursue and complete her Master's Degree in Illinois. Currently among her position as a teacher at this school, she has her own educational consulting business, and writes curriculum for a variety of nonprofit organizations. To better understand Adult 1's perception of the connection between schooling and social mobility, she was asked, "How has formal schooling played a role in your life's successes and failures?"

I think the choices I've made even what I try to get kids to do now, um how can I put it, I think my strength is actually in counseling and the social emotional stuff. When I went to [college] I made the perfect choice because it brought out all of my abilities, it pretty much made me realize who I am career-wise and I was totally prepared for graduate school. Going to graduate school totally connected me to other people that I wasn't used to because I went to a school with so many African Americans. I am thankful that my schooling made me who I am at this moment. I am thankful for that."

To continue this conversation, she was asked, "Is formal education more of a positive influence on your life or the people you encountered in those institutions?" After pausing for a few seconds, she said,

I would say both. The people and the culture were definitely influenced by curriculum in [college], it was definitely challenging. It was a very hard school to go to but there were a lot of good people there so it was very nurturing. Like the

curriculum I use with my kids [current students], connecting is the key to success.

Here Adult 1, battles with the idea of formal schooling as an institution, curriculum, and the supportive people at the given institution. She expressed all three as being hugely involved in her success. She also discussed being challenged. Together, she created her formula for success. Not only does she speak with confidence and a sense of pride because of where she comes from and the academic institutions she went to, she believes through many odds, that she is successful. When asked about her views on schooling and life after the 2008 election of Barack Obama, she quickly counters the idea of schooling as a meritocracy and questions race relations in the United States.

My views have not changed at all, more than ever they have reinforced my views. President Obama is obviously an African American male, but he is a very educated African American male. Even though in law it says that anyone can be president that is not exactly true. Our presidents are usually very educated; Barack Obama is probably one of the most educated presidents we have ever had, which definitely is there to compensate for his race. So if he wasn't so extraordinary with his Harvard law degree I don't think he would have made it to where he is.

To dig a bit deeper, she was asked, "Do you feel like you were raised in an environment that reinforced those ideas above, and it did not require there to be an actual Black man as president for you to feel that being Black and president was a possibility?"

I think it wasn't growing up, it wasn't that I didn't think a Black man could be president, I definitely thought a Black man could be president, I definitely thought there were people capable, what I didn't trust was the white establishment, that they would propel him up into that. It wasn't that I didn't think he wasn't capable, it was even if he won they [White people] probably wouldn't give it to him.

Here she directly questions the possibility that all people have an equal opportunity to be president, and questions the dominant power group and implies that

White people would have to “agree” to “propel” President Obama into the presidency.

Hard work and being educated are not the only factors leading to Barack Obama’s election, in the end, the final say comes from the dominant power group (White people) (West, 1993). Here President Obama’s Blackness automatically places him in an inferior position, yet his education helped “propel” him to a more equal position, relative to his White competitors. She expresses a value in education, yet explains it was not only by education that Barack Obama was elected; she implies the existence of a power dynamic that put the odds against a Black man. When asked to talk more about her life, and if it has changed after President Obama’s 2008 election she states,

Um, just slightly, not really my life, my lifestyle has changed. It has definitely made me think even more “bourgie” than I already was. I think like, oh, I altered my thinking. I go online, I see this Black man and his wife and I’m like, you know what, I’m not going to Florida for vacation this summer, I’m going to South Africa. What I’ve always been told I was, as the Black elite is now proven true. Like, yes I am because we [Black people] are running this country now. My outlook on life is you know, I’ve got to become president in my own right. Like I need to be running stuff, like I need to find out what I am supposed to be running and figure that out. It really put a fire under my buttock, like what am I supposed to be doing?

So be more specific, did President Barack, our first Black president change your outlook on life in any way?

Yeah it made me feel like I might be a little lazy. Like hold on, this man is president at forty-four years old, like what should I be doing? And you know clearly I am more than half his age, so you know I need to get on it...he gave me good markers in life. Like I can look and see what he was doing at certain ages. A lot of what he as and accomplished is educations and connections.

What motivated you more his Blackness or his education?

Oh, it might be equal. I was very excited that he had an Ivy League education, but I was so hype that he was Black. [Laughing] I want to make this very clear, I don’t feel like the majority of White people voted or rallied for him because he

would be a Black president. I think actually the reason he won was because he won a political campaign that helped White people forget he was Black. They were in fact, “colorblind,” they really did vote for the candidate outside of his Blackness...but can that really happen? So it’s really interesting because they [White people] like him, but not his Blackness, I think. So it’s an interesting thing, and I think now that he is president, their eyes have opened a bit and now they realize they put a Black man in office.

Even after expressing such a positive experience in high school and in her post-secondary schooling, Adult 1 still questions society and the White majority, those with power, implicitly stating that her future depends on more than just her education and hard work, but through connections. In other words, ones Blackness can inhibit mobility because of dominant discourse, and a power inequity making it challenging for Blacks to matriculate through schooling and through merit to be “all they can be.” There is still little faith in society, and a belief that she and other Blacks lives are controlled by many factors; including race.

Adult 2, thirty-five, grew up on the Southside of Chicago where he was raised by his mother. He describes his background:

I grew up on the Southside of Chicago. I went to schools all throughout Chicago on the Southside. I have lived all around the area, and am very familiar with these areas and they are not upper class or even middle class. I lived with my mother and older sister. He was then asked, “What is your mother’s highest level of education?” He said, “She has a bachelor’s in education.”

After a brief explanation of his background, and an understanding of his mothers educational attainment, the interview moved to get deeper at his experience in school and his perception of the role it played in his life’s successes.

“Please explain any involvement in your formal schooling experience.”

Well, I was definitely involved. I played sports, I played football, I ran track, and I swam and ran cross-country for a few years. I was also on school council. I was

very much in to extracurricular activities. I wasn't just a, or by any means a guy that just came and went...I was on the honor roll the entire time I was in high school.

To follow up, he was asked if he felt supported in school. Although involved, there was sense of belonging. For clarity, Adult 2 asked, "Do you mean by the school or in general." He was guided to answer as he pleased. The first thing he said was,

Mother, hands down. The school itself was very much supportive in terms of providing resources, and whenever I felt I didn't know anything I knew I could get what I needed to improve. And coaches, there were a lot of supportive coaches.

Not going in to detail as hoped, Adult 2 adamantly said his mom was his support in school. Whether through her support, emotional or academically, Adult 2 suggests family is his biggest support in school. Also, his silence about his father and the role he played in Adult 2's life leaves room for question. What was the role of Adult 2's father; was he involved? Why was there no mention of him?

When told he was raised in a single home, he then provides examples of resources, in people and academic material. Interestingly enough, there was little conversation about teachers and curriculum until later in the interview. There was a vague suggestion about finding resources that were available and then on to coaches. This causes more questions. Throughout his experience in formal schooling, was the academic institution or the people in it more supportive, and which people? Are schools structured as a place where finding support is difficult? With such involvement in school, but with most of his support coming from home, it was necessary to find out Adult 2's perception of success and how schooling played a role in his successes and failures.

Ah, I think it's an individual thing, but ah I would say success, is personal, it was to do with you achieving your personal goals, your feeling of accomplishment in whatever area you are in. I don't feel my success has anything to do with others success or theirs has to do with mine. I do look at myself as being successful. I have set goals and I am happy, I am not ah, I know there are goals to accomplish but even if I don't accomplish them, I think that ah, I am okay with where I am and I am not. I didn't have, there is not one thing that can throw me off and now mean that I am not successful.

By setting personal goals, and working towards achieving those goals qualifies one as being successful. He emphasizes the importance of working towards a goal, but does not express extreme importance in actually reaching all of those goals. By stating that, "one thing can't throw him off," makes it clear that failure is a part of success. There is an expectation to fail, and that is okay that does not mean that one is not still successful. Unlike Adult 1, who discusses reaching goals and that being the key to success, Adult 2 feels the work towards those goals is most important. With that said, finding out how formal school played a role in his life's success and failures was important. According to Adult 2,

I think strong foundations have a powerful influence on success. That is, by learning some key things early, that sets you up to know how to achieve your own personal success. I think I have success in the sense of having education, but not necessarily schooling. I had good teachers; I would say they really taught me some things I did not understand until later. They were the type of teachers who didn't necessarily explain everything to you but they give you the option to get the foundation.

Through personal experiences, and through teachers that made Adult 2 use his mind, he feels he was given the tools to become successful in his own right. He also mentioned a difference between schooling and education. What is the difference? Does schooling always educate? This makes one question whether schooling is always a provider of education, and if education, in many peoples lives is found in other areas, not

just schooling. Next Adult 2 was asked if he felt that his perception of schooling and life changed after the election of Barack Obama, the first Black president. He replied,

I don't really think that matters [Barack's election] in terms of education and schooling. I still have the same passion for education, the same type of drive...It has gotten stronger because Barack Obama is now president. To sum it up in to one thing, I've had to use facets of education in a variety of ways. I've always in class, wondered when and how to use this. You know what I mean, I could go on and on about the weirdest instances when my education has served me.

So it doesn't matter that there is a Black president now?

No, I guess I might not be interpreting the question right. In terms of thinking that now in America [United States] we can have a Black president. I don't think the results are seen. The actual event doesn't reinforce my beliefs....I can definitely say that I am happy we have a Black president, and that opportunity is out there. It is a huge accomplishment, but getting back to those things in the past on me, I don't think my life has changed as a result. I don't think it is something that says I have a higher faith, but you know I thought we were a lot farther away from that type of decision as a country, but...

Leaving his thought unfinished and shrugging his shoulders he continues after being asked why he thinks a Black man elected saying,

I think it does have something to do with change, America, Black and White America is broken. Whatever we have right now, we need a change. You know a change for the better of course, but something that didn't represent the Bush administration. That had a lot to do with it, but other motives, I'll never know. I can only speculate. My biggest feeling is because of the poor administration we had before.

In contrast to Adult 1, Adult 2 discusses a need for change as being key to President Obama's election not his Blackness. Adult 2 does discuss surprise in Obama's election, wondering if the United States were ready. So, although as not as explicit as Adult 1, and her belief that White society was and is not ready for a Black Head of State, Adult 2 also hints at a race being a factor in being accepted as president. He goes deeper here as he expressed a difference in perception depending on class and age. Adult 2 also

states that Barack Obama's election does not reinforce his beliefs, which directly contradicts with Adult 1, who stated his election does reinforce her beliefs. Below, Adult 2 expresses a perceived cleavage as a result of the election of 2008 as it relates to young Black people and the election of Barack Obama.

I think there are some differences they [young Black people] see between themselves and Barack Obama. I think that they see him as an image, they don't see him deeper than that image. That difference is like what they see when they see a White man. I'll take it back, sometimes they see successful African Americans and they don't see themselves.

Here one finds a deeper conversation, revealing Adult 2's belief that young Black people see "successful" Blacks differently than they see themselves. There is a deep divide between young Black kids' perceptions of making it into prominent society-defined positions of success, and their actual ability to make it there. Where does this come from? Does it come from schools, discourse, and family? Shouldn't schools be institutions to change the dominant discourse if that is the case, and to help young Blacks affirm their abilities in "succeeding" no matter the distance? Black youth, in general come from "undereducated" families, how is this cycle broken if educational institutions are not a means to help break cycles of stagnation and immobility (Lipman, 2004)?

Raised in a completely different demographic that Adult 1 and Adult 2, Adult 3, thirty-eight describes his background.

I grew up in the Tristate area, [mainly] Pennsylvania in steer towns; my dad was in US steel, small towns. It was a humble experience. I lived with my mom and dad.

His parents both attained a high school diploma, but are truly a blue collar working class family. Adult 3, without prompting, was cautious of divulging too much

information about his family and background. He says nothing of education until prompted. Interestingly, both of his parents only have a high school degree, yet when asked if growing up his family valued education, he stated, “Yeah, they wanted me to do my best. They helped out with homework and stayed on top of me. I was always pretty self-motivated.”

According to social standards, a high school diploma “these days” is not impressive, nor do enough to help someone (in general) climb the ladder to “success” (Lipman, 2004). His parents although undereducated by today’s standards were supportive in their son’s formal schooling. Are parent educational levels related to the value of education they have? How can value be interpreted, by word or action...or both? Are student’s experiences in formal schooling connected to their parent’s experiences in formal schooling? This is how Adult 3 explains his high school experience. “Because I went to a majority White high school, it was more or less culture shock. I went those avenues, sports and clubs, to fit in more than be involved.”

Did you feel like you were fulfilling stereotypes of Blacks?

I more or less felt that I was trashing stereotypes...There was a lot of ah, misconceptions about Black people, and we are talking about Pennsylvania. And for the most part I was destroying stereotypes.

Adult 3, though expressing he was physically involved in his schooling experience, was more to fit in than to be involved in the different clubs or sports in school. In other words, he did not want to stand out and felt clubs and sports were an avenue to achieve that goal. He was involved to prove his “normality” to his White peers. To move closer to Adult 3’s perception of success and his experience in schooling, he

was asked to define success and explain whether he thought he was successful based on his definition.

In my own words, ah it's [success] ever changing. The more you learn in life the more you redefine what success is, I don't think it has a monetary aspect to it, but ah it's being happy in what you are doing finding balance in life body mind and spirit. I would say I've had success, but once again, I reevaluate what success is for me as the years go on.

Closely tied to Adult 2, and his perception of success his idea of reevaluating success and working toward goals at a given time and in a given area, contrast with Adult 1 as she felt that achieving specific goals equates with success.

Would you relate your experience in formal schooling with your definition of success and whether you are successful?

I would say my perspective on formal schooling, is that what I took away from it is not accepting what standards are in life, but always questioning them. So ah, academics...bookwork, I felt were secondary to me actually heightening my awareness.

Here, Adult 2 makes a distinction between the actual structure of schooling, and actually learning. Are schools a tool for learning, yet only a tool if taught how to learn (Hurn, 1992; West, 1993)? How can schools be a tool if they do not teach young people to critically think and use their minds? How closely are low-expectations tied to low critical thinking skills? How did Adult 2 learn to think in such an oppressive environment detailed below?

Did you feel that school was supportive?

I felt that my school did support me academically to do what ever I might have needed to do, but I think that at the same token, that society in itself, we are in a capitalistic society, where money can be spent and you need money to buy commodities, which teaches us to focus on having those monies rather than being happy in the profession you choose...I didn't feel I had support from my guidance

counselor she didn't encourage me to excel academically she was just trying to get me into the service trades. More than anything else, I think in the school culture there was just a lot of ignorance in general towards Blacks. What I mean by ignorance is people did not know Blacks. Students literally mimicked what they learned from their parents. They had little contact with Blacks. Case in point, I was called a Nigger in school, I had White people, my swim teachers, tell me what Blacks couldn't swim because their muscle density is so high, and things of that nature. I've also had classmates ask me if I had a tail.

As a follow up question, he was asked if schooling is a fair system and to speak toward his personal experiences.

In general you know the major issues I have with high school students is a lot of focus is on standardized testing, and I do see a lot of cultural bias in the testing, and it's weighted too much. As far as my own personal experience, I was luckily just self-motivated enough to succeed. Case in point my advisor in high school wanted me to do the trades, and do things I felt, not to say the trades aren't important, but I felt that that was secondary to me excelling in math and science where my interests were.

For Adult 3, it is clear that being Black in high school was problematic, not only because of peer ignorance, but through adults in the building. Adult 3 stated that through discourse, students and adults continued to perpetuate stereotypes about Blacks because of their ignorance. For many students, being Black is perceived as a constant burden and many are constantly fighting with common discourse to dispel stereotypes (Anderson, 1988; Perry, 1993). In this case, Adult 3 took on this role as token and explains how racism was constant and accepted in his school. He states how racism is "polite" below. Here he also mentions inequities in standardized testing which is a popular indicator of social and post-secondary success (Califati, 2009). "It's [racism] is different in the South, it's more overt. And in the [Northern] city and towns it's more covert. People are a bit more polite about their racism."

Again, Adult 3 notes the experience with his guidance counselor and comments from his peers and teachers about muscle density and having a tail. These experiences within high school made it difficult to find “refuge” in traditional education. Although, he found his way through the traditional educational system, he was constantly on the outskirts, seen as “other” and constantly working towards proving himself academically, and proving his legitimacy as a human being. His mentors and role-models did not come from within the structures of schooling. In fact, it was his father and uncles who encouraged him and kept him motivated at his lowest points in school. Adult 3’s first hand experience with explicit racist remarks and the implicit racism throughout high school truly shaped his outlook on life, success, and being Black in America and America’s schools.

Because of his experiences in formal schooling, he was asked why he thought Barack Obama was elected. He said,

I am not surprised he was elected because of who he ran against [George Bush II). Obviously he was the better choice. Um, I am surprised by the ugliness I have seen since he has been in office, particularly by the Republican Party. You know they have likened him to a Nazi and things of that nature. I feel that he is under a lot of spot-light and he inherited a very very deep problem in the United States when he came in to office.

Adult 3 does not address any issues of race here, which is in contrast to Adult 1, yet similar to Adult 2. Here he suggests that Barack Obama was elected because of a previous political party and president that were obviously failing the United States people. This makes me question his perception of Barack Obama’s win. Does Adult 3’s, answer suggest little faith in the people of the United States, because the emphasis he makes in his response is on President Bush and his horrible administration? After

recognizing President Bush's administration as bad, he then recognizes Barack Obama as the better candidate?

Have your views on life and schooling changed since the election of our first Black

President Barack Obama?

I don't know, I think that I'll have to think about this one. Ahh, I feel it's a step in the right direction. I for the most part, I feel it's a testament to the fact that there are things in society that can change and move in a positive direction. In that sense, I am optimistic that things can change, I think those years under Bush kind of really agitated the government. But I think that there is hopefulness...I think particularly in our community [Black community] there isn't a lot of positive relationships with Black males. You don't see a lot of positive images with Black males and I think seeing the Head of State as a Black male is a positive thing and I think that it does help motivate kids...for those in elementary school they will probably not remember a time before there was Black man in office. So I think it's a different time for our youth to see that, whereas it was just a hype dream for some of us [Blacks] before that.

Adult 2 and 3 both discuss Barack Obama's affect on Black youth, and although differing in opinion provide insight on the realities of some Black young people. Adult 2 suggests that Black youth have trouble relating to the image of Barack Obama, because he represents "other." Even though he is a Black male Adult 2 asserts that many young Black people find it hard to relate or see themselves in that position. Adult 3 focuses on the fact that President Obama is a Black male role model and he is real and can serve as that model for many Black youth who do not have a "regular" positive Black male role model. Both discussions lie in the perceptions of individual Black youth and the experiences they live. He could be an inspiration to some, yet he could be a far off image to others.

To summarize, Adult 3 was asked his outlook on life now that there is a Black president.

I feel there are still, more or less highlights that show a strong division in this country. If we go back to the “Tea Parties” we had going on, this whole Socialism-Nazi thing that you are kind of throwing in the mix it kind of highlights the divide, and for the most part it is an economic divide that just so happens to be divided by race. And that race with the power would be Caucasian. So my outlook on life is still positive. I think that ah, and this goes back to my motivation striving towards balance of the body, mind, and spirit that that is really my focus. I think there is hope that we can live in a society that can be my motivation, rather than other garbage.

Adult, like Adult 1 mentions this dynamic of power, which is directly related to the CRT model, as racism is derived from this power inequity. So here he explicitly and implicitly discusses race as an ingrained factor leading to inequity in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Stovall, 2006).

Do you have hope for the school system in the United States?

Well see the thing is, the thing is it's not just one issue. It's not just the school issue, it's societal. I think that we as a society have to change our values...case in point war. We want our children to be better people and go into society and solve issues nonviolently, but as a country we have historically solved our problems with violence.

Is there hope for societal change?

There is always hope for societal change, I'd like to think I am not the only person who thinks this way. I mean um, I know a lot of people I associate with who are moving towards something beyond the mundane. I feel like society in itself is like a trap because it keeps you chasing the dollar. Keeping you focused on something else...like your 9 to 5. I think our work ethic in this country is skewed towards working you to death instead of the pursuit of knowledge...

Here Adult 3 brings up issues of class, social values, and schooling. He expressed a belief in the difference between working and pursuing knowledge. Is there a divide between our social definition of schooling and education and learning? Similar to Adult 2, Adult 3 recognizes some hypocrisy in how young people are educated, and then what is expected of those young people. He mentions class as being a major issue in our

society in terms of fairness, moreover stating that Black people happen to be victims of a system filled with contradictions. Not surprisingly, just as Adult 1 and 2 states, there is some hope and motivation felt by the presence of a Black man in the White House. This leaves room for growth and leads society one step closer to where it needs to go. But where does it need to go? What would that look like? Adult 3 might question whether our capitalist society is built to accommodate a system where all people do have equal opportunity, and all are reaching the top? In that case, who will be at the bottom to support the needs of those on top? Adult 2 also mentions hope for societal change, even after stating a belief in an inequitable balance of power. This speaks to the power of hope. How has hope played a role in Black success and mobility?

In contrast to Adult 3, Adult 4, forty-four, grew up on the Southside of Chicago, raised by his single mother after his father moved to the South. When asked to explain his background, he stated,

Okay, I grew up in Chicago on the Southside; I had a fairly nice childhood. Um, I stayed in an um, mid-income level family home environment - single parent home for a few years. Um went to a nice high school. I joined the military and after that I got married at twenty. I have two children.

What did your parents do?

My mom had different professions, she as a nurse and also worked with insurance. My dad he worked for the railroads for a few years.

What is the highest level of education for your parents?

My mom has an associates, my dad has a high school diploma.” When asked about his background, similar to Adult 3 he only mentioned schooling briefly. He talked generally about where he went to school, yet there was not as much discussion as there was with Adult 1. Again, similar to Adult 3, the levels of educational attainment of both parents was not as high as Adult 1.

Does this have anything to do with ones perception of education and social mobility?

Please explain any involvement in high school.

Um, I participated a little bit; I wasn't a stand out student. I was sort of someone who came to class, listened to lectures and passed. I was just average." Adult 3 discussed little interest in school participation. He goes on to explain that, "Throughout high school, my freshman through junior year, it was like I didn't have a sense of direction. I didn't think I was getting anything out of the school system or learning anything that I felt prepared me until my senior year when I had a Black history class. The teacher of that class stands out a lot in my high school career, because she was really open-minded towards the Black culture, and plus history itself. She had a deep passion, and love for Black history. She kind of opened my eyes to culture and stuff.

It was not until Adult 4 learned about his Black community in his African American History class that he too found value in school and himself. This speaks volumes for a relevant curriculum that connects to students. Before his senior year, Adult 3 speaks of just floating by. He went to school because he had to, but he was learning very little, he says he was, "just going through the motions." School was something his mom just made him do. He brought nothing to the experience, and got nothing out of the experience. This feeling of pride did not come naturally to Adult 4, as it did with Adult 1. Adult 1 expresses a sense of pride as she comes from, and grew up around a group of Black elite people. Through her community she learned her value and has a confidence in who she is and her ability as a person and academic. This may speak to the importance of a historically relevant curriculum to Black youth (Green, 1992).

Curious about his high school demographics so to better understand his perception of schooling, he was asked to take about the racial demographics of his high school. "Well my freshman and sophomore year, well I went to many different schools,

but freshman and sophomore year was totally White, junior and senior year were totally Black. So I kind of got a mixed experience.” When asked if he had friends of other races, he said, “Sort of, it was like I mean we spoke to each other and participated in sports together.”

Many believe there are differences in the level of education based on many factors including race, class, and geographic location of schools (Lipman, 2004).

Although Adult 4, discusses having “mixed experiences,” he articulates how today, Black poor neighborhood schools are not properly funded and he implies being “around” these poor schools, whether by attending them or visiting, this is his truth and the truth for many.

I know that in the Black neighborhoods, especially the poor ones, they are not getting the proper funding for schools. And the children aren’t being taught what they need to know, they are getting a “cheap” education. Not a real education that will put them on a path to success or guide them to a good future. I think what the children in the school system in Chicago, or what I’ve been around is just like a place to keep them off the streets until they graduate. I don’t think the majority are receiving a real education.

Raising his voice, and using his hands to talk he expresses a sense of pain and frustration as he perceives the constant re-creation of a Black undereducated underclass by poor Black schools. He talks of a society that is under-educating poor Black children. He questions society, the school system (specifically in Chicago and where he’s been) and see schools as babysitters. Here, he also talks of success. For more clarification, he is asked his definition of success and if he believes he is successful based on his definition (Lipman, 2004). Adult 4 states, “I determine success as chasing your goals and

following them, and being happy yet still striving and taking care of responsibilities. I don't think you define success by money; you can have money and still be a loser."

Similar to Adult 2 and 3, Adult 4 clearly states that success is not defined by money. Unlike Adult 1, who recognizes in this society money is a factor in being successful. With Adult 4's definition of success, is he stating that schooling is keeping Black students from reaching their goals? Can underserved schools be a barrier to Black students and success?

Have your views on life and schooling changed after the election of the United States first Black president in 2008?

Well I tell you what; it might have changed, by him being a Black president. It inspires children that they can be more if they apply themselves. But just being a Black president isn't going to change the educational system.

Adult 4 slightly contradicts himself, yet interestingly this is a common contradiction among Black youth as will be discussed in the student participant interviews. Earlier he questions the school system and society and articulates the problem with underfunded, underserved schools for poor Blacks. There is some understanding that the system is inequitable. Then in the latter, he states that working hard in schools "inspires children that they can be more if they apply themselves." Then stating the educational system is not going to change. Applying oneself can only do so much if the system is inequitable. It is almost like beating the odds. According to Ladson-Billings (1998) and West (1993) our social system is inherently inequitable. How in-grained is this idea of meritocracy in a school system that is visually inequitable

(Ladson-Billings, 1998)? Again here, is hope the only tie between working hard and success for Black youth?

Have your views on life and schooling changed after the election of Barack Obama?

Um, maybe just a little, nothing really spectacular...I am glad we have a Black president, and it may motivate young Black Americans to shoot for their goals, but he is just a president, the government and system hasn't changed. It's still the same; he is just a figurehead out there. Even though he loves the country and wants things to change, I don't think he has the power to do it right now, because of the forces against him.

When asked to clarify, what was meant by forces, he responds, "Well you know the politics in government, for instance, like the big battle over healthcare, he has a lot on his plate, and he can't change on his own without the help of congress."

Do you think race plays a role?

Yes. I mean we live in America, right? [laughing] This is a racially motivated country. Just because we have a Black president doesn't mean racism has stopped. If anything it has increased a lot. I don't see that by him being Black president racism is going to stop.

Similar to the other Adult participants, there are several questions about the system, and strong belief that race plays a role in society, and in schooling. Again, there is a sense of motivation and hope because there is now a Black president, but there is little if any belief in structural change which is what Adult 4 feels is necessary.

What is your outlook on life, now that there s a Black man as president?

It's still the same, it hasn't changed. I mean you have to keep your eyes on the prize and stay focused on what's really going on. Even though we have a Black president we still in the Black and Hispanic communities, we still have a lot of obstacles in our way to overcome and it hasn't changed. We still have to focus on our goals and this isn't changing just because we have a Black president.

The system is same to Adult 4, but there is a sense of hope as he discusses the Black and Hispanic communities as groups with obstacles, as in race and class, to overcome, even in an inequitable system, that he believes needs to change. Again, the mere image of a Black man as president is motivating to Blacks if nothing else. Understanding that Blacks are fighting an uphill battle in an inequitable society makes symbols like Barack Obama - symbols of hope, huge.

To clarify, Adult 4 was asked if his formal schooling played a role in his beliefs on success and failures.

Through experiences in life, and school and just you know just different challenges in life has prepared me to be on time, and to be focused on things. I have seen a lot of my friends drop out of school and go by the wayside. They didn't have focus or motivation.

Did school give you the motivation to stay on track?

Not really, like I said it wasn't until my senior year of school that I was motivated. It was just something I did. You had to get up and go to school and do homework, its life it had to happen.

So did a Black president motivate you?

Well, yeah just a little. I mean it's great we have a Black president, and I was very happy we elected a Black president and just the spirit of the people was high. Now it's kind of down so I guess it's good to have a Black president.

Neither school, nor family motivated Adult 4 in high school, learning his history and where he came from, was what motivated him to excel in school. Still today, there is little value in schooling, because of its inequitable nature. Adult 4 does discuss Barack Obama as a motivator for Black youth to work hard and reach their goals. The real question is work hard at what? Should Black youth, (specifically poor Black youth) continue to work hard in school if the system continues to recycle them to the underclass-

where only the few rise to the top, as tokens and examples in an unfair system (Lipman, 2004)?

Adult 5, twenty-six, grew up in Ohio.

Originally I am from Ohio; I grew up in a suburb right outside of the city. Eventually, we moved into the city. Working class, I guess you could say, yeah, my parents divorced when I was in grade-school and I was raised by my mom.

When asked her parents highest level of education, she responded, “My dad did some college; he was a security guard and then a police officer. My mom graduated from high school and now she works at a hospital doing administrative things.”

Out of these five adult participants, two were raised by both of their parents; the other three were raised by their mothers. How much does this influence one's value in education, or does it? Unlike Adult 1, schooling was not discussed when asked about her background. But when asked about her family's perception of schooling, she articulates a strong belief in schooling and a strong desire from her mother mostly, to go to school because she did not have the opportunity to go to school growing up.

How do you perceive your family's feeling about schooling?

My mom was the second oldest of seven siblings, and my grandparents said they only have enough money to send my uncles to school. So my mom always told me that I was going to go to college if it is the last thing I do. My dad while not always present, when he was, was always like ‘I am so proud of you, go to school’.

Please explain any involvement in your schooling experience.

I attended an all girls Catholic school in Cleveland, Ohio because the public schools in Cleveland are absolutely terrible and underfunded and I think in 2006 only 25 percent of the students actually graduated [from public schools] from high school, which is atrocious. So I went, so my parents, my mom, saved every penny she could and sent me to a small catholic school, even though I attended several Catholic schools because of lack of funding and them closing down, I mean I did

student council, Service Club, National Honors Society, a lot of the typical organizations and things. I wasn't ever that athletic so I didn't do sports, but in other student groups like environmental clubs.

Although extremely involved in her formal schooling experience, later she expresses a feeling of being tracked - because of her demeanor, then marginalized because of her Blackness.

So would you describe yourself as successful and how do you define success?

Yes, I would describe myself as successful, I think that for me its um, feeling like I am able to, I dunno accomplish goals and having some of the basic things and feeling like I can afford a place to stay and pay my bills and things like that.

For more clarification, Adult 5 was asked if money played any role in her personal definition of success. Adult 5, was then asked then asked to clarify her definition of success, she states, "Right, if I had to make up a definition for success...that's a really hard question, um I guess self fulfilled." She then went on to give an explanation of how her mother was a successful person and parent but never earned a lot of money. She alluded to the fact that money was not necessary for one to be defined as successful.

Similar to Adult 1, Adult 5 sees success as reaching personal goals. Also closely related to Adult 3, who stated success should be constantly reevaluated based on where people are in their life and what they are working for. Self-fulfilled calls for an understanding that being fulfilled constantly changes as people change.

Has formal schooling played a role in your life's successes and failures?

Oh, well I mean certainly, whether it's a myth or not, I grew up in a culture that said if you work hard you will succeed. Clearly it's not that simple, but um it's a message I was given as a child, having, I always think back to my grade school. It was a really small predominantly African American Catholic school, where I feel like they only expected certain students to succeed, and I happened to be lucky enough to be one of the students that received certain resources where other

people in my class were just as bright and capable but for whatever reason they weren't selected, as they [teachers] knew the smart kids and who were going to be successful. They weren't encouraged in the same way and I was. I definitely feel like I was told in order to be successful I would need formal education to go to college or you know beyond high school.

Here Adult 5 mentions an implicit tracking system, guided by teacher perceptions of specific students. While discussing this 'unspoken' system, she goes deeper as she talks about why she was chosen to be a successful student.

"I feel like I have a certain attitude, and part I believe it is not only how you do in school, but part is your temperament. Whether it be, just who you are or you know, how my mom taught me to interact with adults-to um respect and cooperate and things like that-for those reasons I just remember being there, and I felt like I was given more time and attention than some of the other children, they were just trying to get them out of the door...at this school, there really wasn't something as clear as tracking, I mean the majority of students were Black none of the teaching staff was Black and you know, in Ohio, it's changed since then, but their used to be a 9th grade proficiency test and everyone had to take the test in the 8th grade. And if you passed it great, if not you had up until your senior year to pass it. Um, when we were taking the test, they received the results back and maybe three or four people in our class passed all five parts of the proficiency test. So they [teachers] "knew" who passed the test before the even announced the results. They could guess who passed. There were only certain people who they thought would pass.

Success defined by Adult 5's experience was strictly related to behavior.

Fortunately, she had a good "temperament" and was chosen to succeed, at least for the moment. Sadly, as in high school her fate changed. She also discusses a lowered expectation for most of her Black peers from White teachers. Not only did the teachers feel these expectations, so did the students. Adult 5 clearly expresses her experience with the 8th grade proficiency test and the "natural" tracking system that guided student and teacher expectations.

So what influenced you most to be successful?

I would say it was probably my mom. I still don't understand how she did it today, she worked two jobs every night and she was the secretary on the PTA at my school. She was just there all the time. She ran the bookmobile-thing that came in my school. My mom was so serious about our education that, I mean, she was my biggest influence. Not necessarily the people at the school, I don't know if they even tried to challenge us. They could have challenged us.

Even in schools, so much "better" than the poor underfunded public schools in Cleveland, Adult 3 experienced discrimination and did not feel challenged. As a low to middle class family, this creates questions about school choice. Even though Adult 5 got away from the public school system, is her fate any different? Did her mom really have a choice, could she have attended better funded schools that did not keep shutting down because of a lack of funding? From there, the questions moved toward her perception of schooling now that a Black man is president.

Have your views on schooling changed after the election of Barack Obama in 2008?

No, not really. I think that the election of Barack Obama is historic and great, and I am very proud of this achievement, but like um, I dunno, he's one man and there are thousands and millions of people who are just as talented and just as creative out there doing things even if they don't happen to be running this country.

So even though there is now a Black man in office, it doesn't change your view?

I don't think that it has influenced my view on education, I mean I have always been taught to value education and to some extent, hope it will encourage some who aren't as prepared or have access to resources to pursue that, but that is even a conversation to have because it [education] won't automatically come to everyone.

For more clarification she was asked, "Have your views on life changed on life after the election of Barack Obama in 2008?" She said, "Um, I don't think so; I will say that when he was first starting to run, I wasn't sure he'd be elected because I didn't know for myself whether America was ready."

What do you mean by America?

I dunno, just everyday life there are so many instances where you come up against racism or sexism or classism, just things that impact peoples life. So if we go back a little bit I was tracked in high school I went in freshman year and I was so excited to take honors math, and this lady, my school guidance counselor, looked me in my face and told me she didn't want me to be *too* challenged. Whatever that means, and so, I was not allowed to take a single honors class, even though some of my white peers who scored less on their proficiency exam or on the entrance exam were able to take honors classes. Um, and I didn't do 'stellar' on the entrance exam, but I had solid grades and I was even willing to compromise. I didn't need honors English or history, but I just wanted honors math. No one would help me.

Were these people white?

Yes. So I had to prove that I could do well, so I had to get A+'s in those classes and then I had to get the teacher to say it was okay to me to move to an advanced class. It was really frustrating for me.

So when you said American wasn't ready, what did you mean?

I'm not just talking about White people, I feel like there are racial hierarchies and ways of operating are so engrained in *everyone* in this culture. Not just White people or Black people, but everyone. You know like, there are so many people that make up America, from so many different backgrounds and places with different histories, that I do think that ah, the messages that everyone gets about Black people lead to a level of distrust about whatever topic, whether it be work ethic or intelligence.

When asked, "Do you think that message is actually perpetuated by schooling?"

She explains, "I think that yes, I think that schooling reinforces that message in simple ways like in the history we cover, and the curriculum and just everything."

With great frustration, Adult 5 recalled a situation similar to Adult 3. A White adult, in a schooling institution explicitly oppressed them by holding their goals at bay, and through their position of power, kept each students' expectations low. Both

Adult 3 and 4, see race as a major factor in their treatment. As discussed in CRT, racism is not just a hatred of races, but the use of that hatred through a structure of power.

Racism only exists in systems where there is a mismatch of power and discrimination through action is possible because there is no way for those in a position of less power to overcome the discrimination (Stovall, 2006). Do schools, mainly those with poor Blacks, continue to have lower expectations for its populations? Are there the same expectations for poor Black and minority schools as there is for majority White suburban schools?

Interestingly here, Adult 5 addresses the issue of buy-in. Not only do most Whites and Blacks buy-in to the current social and schooling systems so do other races. And what our society has created is a hierarchy of races, where minorities step on each other to get to the top, and stay as far from the bottom. In doing so, racism persists, stereotypes are perpetuated, and our oppressive system is 'normal' (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Stovall, 2006).

When asked about her outlook on life, now that a Black man is president, she said simply, "It's nice to see, it says something as where we are as a country and that we are moving forward."

Adult 5 was raised by a woman who was a single parent, whose highest level of education was a high school diploma. This woman worked to send her daughter to a private all-girls Catholic school in a suburb in Cleveland, because she wanted her daughter to have the educational opportunity that she did not have. The three Catholic schools Adult 5 had to attend, because many of them had to shut down because of a lack of funding were still perceived better than public schooling in Cleveland.

It is interesting how transferring a child three times to different schools, was not as bad as having to attend the “terrible and underfunded” Cleveland public high schools (Adult 5). These Catholic schools, specifically her high school was small, and she says created a lot of opportunities of extracurricular and academically related activities. Even with this experience, many of her educational goals were deferred because of lowered expectations as barriers to some of her desired goals. Other than transitioning in to an honors math class, she was not allowed to take any other honors courses. After trying to advocate for herself, by talking to administration, teachers and guidance counselors her perception of schooling began to solidify as a place that was unfair to all students, yet a place she had to go in-order to “succeed.” This clearly shows a dynamic of power, and oppression.

Interestingly, as a student and currently looking back on her formal schooling experience, Adult 5 saw many of the structural inequities in terms of a form of informal tracking; based on teacher perceptions of students and their abilities, as well as standardized proficiency tests that all students were supposed to take in the eighth grade (but have until their senior year to pass), yet very students passed the first time. Only three or four students passed the proficiency test in her eighth grade graduating class of fifteen students.

Adult Collective Analysis

Adult participants remember their formal schooling, yet talked mostly about their high school experiences. There was explicit and implicit discrimination and racism discussed (Adult 5, and Adult 3), as well as nonchalant attitude about school (Adult 4).

On the other side of the spectrum, Adult 1 had a challenging yet encouraging and caring experience as she describes being from elite, loving, and supportive family and Black community. With these varied schooling experiences, as they all matriculated through high school and received diploma's -- no matter the positive or negative experiences -- these adults "finished" school, which in itself says they see value in education. How do the experiences had by these adults, play a role in their vision of success and mobility?

The perception about Barack Obama and his relationship to schooling and the personal success of the adults who participated in this study are strikingly similar, yet the reasons behind these similarities vary. To explore success and schooling, the participants were first asked about their personal definition of success, and whether they believe they are successful. Success is not narrowly defined as it relates to social mobility, and to avoid making inaccurate assumptions, it is important to allow and understand personal definitions (Snipp & Hirschmann, 2006)

Interestingly, when defining success the common trend among these participants is the idea that money does not equal success. Either the participants did not comment on money when defining success, or they were explicit in stating that it did not define success. All the participants, in different words, defined success as a personal perception molded by individual goals. All, but Adult 1, gave a very general definition, a definition that did not include money as a factor, and could be interpreted in a variety of ways merely because goals vary from individual to individual. The vagueness of the definition of success, as defined by the adult participants, leaves room for discussion. According to the definitions included, whether society views one's goals as positive or negative,

anyone can be successful if they reach, or according to some, are working toward, their goals.

It is noteworthy how these participants perceive success, all of them working in a school, yet leaving the definition so loosely defined. In society there are several norms that people recognize as imperative stops on the road to success, and that usually includes high academic marks, post-secondary schooling or learning of some kind, and connections to cultural or social capital -- an “in” to the elite network of “successful” people (Katz, 1999). The participants’ immediate response to defining success was on an individual level. Meaning success should be based on feeling good and being happy with whatever area one is striving within. It was touched upon with Adult 1, but she addressed these social norms only within her personal life. She talked about majority of norms society uses to access someone as successful, including her schooling, career, and money. None of the participants said, “You must go to high school, graduate, then go to college to be successful.” In other words, there is not a specific plan that uses the structure of schooling that makes success attainable for all, no matter race, history, or location.

As educators, working in an institution and public structure that preached education, higher education, and “good jobs,” it’s interesting that the success philosophies of the participants had little to do with education and more to do with their personal expectations. There was little, if any discussion about the role of schooling in individuals being successful. This leads to more questions: Are there levels and areas of success: individual, social, monetary? What type of success is more important? How

should schools address issues of success? If the actual action of going to school is perceived as more important than the learning and knowledge people gain, what is our (educators') social message on success? If schools consistently use society and its' definition of success are we marginalizing some students because their success is defined by survival (or other) and not a PhD?

Student Participants

Randomly, five freshman students, during the 2010-2011 school year, were chosen following a "first come, first serve" rule. Three young women and two young men were interviewed. All five of these students signed an assent form and turned in a parent/guardian permission slip. These students all perceive themselves as Black and live in the Chicago area. Here they discuss their involvement in high school, and some give their perception of the purpose of schooling. Their experience given through personal testimony, opinion, and perception are given below. The majority of each student analyses will be given at the end of each interview. The findings show very similar experiences and feelings about schooling, race and Barack Obama's election. The analyzed interviews shorten after each participant unless comparing and contrasting differing views

More powerful than their testimonies, is their silence. Whether it be the natural power dynamic of the interview, a lack of confidence, a fear of speaking to adults, a history of being taught that quiet equals good, or being used to not being *heard*, kept the majority of these Students from speaking their minds, even after follow-up questions

(Ladson-Billings, 1998). Their silence is unnerving. The majority of the interview questions are kept in the interview so to hear the silence.

Student 1, was asked to please explain her personal background including the size of her family, where she lived and what it was like she said, “I was born in Iowa, I have two sisters, and I live with my mom and dad on the Southside of Chicago. We live in a house.” She describes her neighborhood as follows, “I think good because we don’t have like gangs and its clean my neighbors are nice. Both of her parents have a college degree. “My mom is getting her masters to be a social worker, and my dad is a teacher. After school he does like a boys and girls club.”

When asking about her involvement in high school she said, “I think I am very involved. I am a cheerleader and have a lot of school spirit, I love to do pep rallies.” She also talked about her grades being B’s. “

At fifteen years old, how do you define successful, and do you feel that you are successful?

Yes, because like um, because like most fifteen year olds only have one parent, but I have two that I can go to with my problems. I can go to my cheerleading coach if I need her and my teachers and they can help me if I need help.

Has formal schooling played a role in your life’s successes and failures?

Yes, because when I was in sixth and seventh I had bad grades, but when I got to 8th grade they were getting better, and now that I am in high school I am getting A’s and B’s. In 8th grade I had mainly C’s.

So what specifically about school do you feel helped you make you successful?

“Probably trying to go to college, I want to go to college really bad.”

Have you always wanted to go to college?

“Yes.”

Have your views on schooling changed after the election of Barack Obama in 2008?

“Not really.”

Why?

“Before he was elected I felt I was successful and after he was elected I still feel successful.”

Have your views on life changed? Do you feel that there are other opportunities now that he is elected?

Like before, like when I was younger we had mainly White presidents, so I just thought that was *their* job, I thought that was mainly White people’s job. Like bigger jobs like that...even though African Americans go to college and stuff.

So what does it mean now that Barack Obama is elected?

“That, we, [Black people] like anybody, like my parents, like they really raised me to know that I can be anything I want.”

Do you feel like him being president makes that a reality?

“Yes, a lot of students don’t have two parents to tell them that. But now other children can see that they can be anything they want.”

Do you feel like you have a different outlook on life now that that there is a Black president?

“Not that much.”

Can you explain why?

“Well I don’t know, I just don’t.”

Student 1 expresses several problematic beliefs, the most concerning was her belief that White people do certain “big” jobs, and Blacks don’t, even with education. Barack Obama as president, changed her perception, but where did this young Black girl hear that she, as a Black person, could only go so “high.” She talks about her family being educated, and her own desire to go to college, yet she at one time in her life felt inferior because of her skin. I question if this is perpetuated by family, schooling, or society. She also expresses a learned belief in school as a merit based catalyst to success. Her she believes success comes from schools and is directly related to her grades.

Agreeing with the adults, Student 1 sees little change in the United States now that there is a Black president, but she experienced a paradigm shift. Her perception of Blacks as a whole, and their abilities is completely different now that there is a Black president. Now that the image of being president is not so light in pigment, doors have opened for Student 1.

Lastly, with much contradiction, Student 1 felt like she could be an architect before President Obama’s election, and still feels that way, so one must question her definition of “big jobs like that [president]. All in all, she as taught through discourse, and experience, no matter the vehicle - that there is a separation in vertical mobility among Black and White people (Perry, 1993). Yet maybe through hope, she still feels she will accomplish her goal at becoming an architect.

Student 2, similar to Student 1 was not born in Chicago.

Can you please explain your personal background, where you grew up and your lifestyle?

“I was born in Atlanta Georgia, then we came to Chicago, and now we live ...”
[on the Southside of Chicago] There really isn’t that much violence there, it’s just the next few blocks where everything be happening.”

What do you mean everything?

“People start getting killed on the corner. And they just don’t come on our block.”

Who do you live with?

“My mom and my daddy.”

Both of her parents have a high school diploma, her father working on trains and her mom staying home helping with the kids. Student 2 talks about her involvement in school below:

So, right now, how would you describe your sense of involvement in school?

“I am involved in a lot, and I get straight A’s. When softball starts, I want to join. And next year I am going to do track.”

When asked to define success she said, “I would define it, by someone trying to do their best at what you do, and if you just succeed, like if you try your best, even if you don’t get it, at least if you try you are successful.”

Do you think your life has been successful? Why?

“Yes, because I try my best and I graduated from 8th grade and I try my best and I get straight A’s and I really want to go to college.”

Where do you want to go?

“Uh, UCLA.”

Would you say your family values education?

“Yes. Because they are proud of me, and they make sure my sisters stay on task.

They help me with a lot of stuff if I don’t get it.”

Have you always wanted to go to college?

“Yes.”

Do your parents want you to go to college?

“Yes. They do want me to go, even if they can’t pay for it, I am going to try to get a scholarship.”

Can you tell me if formal schooling played a role in your life’s success and failures?

“Well I have been doing good since kindergarten, except in seventh grade math, but it’s much better now.”

Do you feel that going to school is going to help you become successful?

“It can because if I didn’t go to school then I wouldn’t know what to do but if I miss school then I would try to get a job and end up working at a burger place.”

Have your views on schooling changed after President Barack Obama was elected in 2008?

“No, because I have always like school.”

So you valued school before a Black president was elected?

“Yes.”

Have your views on life changed after the election of Barack Obama?

“No, because I always wanted to go to college and get a job and stuff like that.”

Why do you think you have always wanted to do that?

“If my dad dies, then I could give mom money to pay the bills or something.”

Why do you think you have that idea in your head?

“Umm.”

Is it just inside of you that you want to do well?

“Yes.”

What is your outlook on life now that there is a Black man in the highest position as president?

“My outlook on life is that we can do better.”

We?

“Like the whole world...like to stop global warming and like save the earth.”

Do you feel more motivated now that there is a Black man as president?

“Yes, cause I know I can like try my best and I look up to him.”

Why do you look up to him?

“Cause he did all the things he could and now he is a Black president.”

What do you want to be when you grow up?

“Writer, or literature teacher because I like writing.”

And you think you can do all those things?

“Yes.”

And you thought you could do all of those things before Barack Obama was elected?

“Yes. “

Like Student 1, Student 2 discusses schooling as a meritocracy. She wants to go to college and connects her success to formal schooling. Her parents, like Student 1, also push her to excel in school, and there is obvious conversation in her family about college, because she discusses the cost and getting a scholarship even though her parents only have a high school diploma. Implicitly she also discusses the concept of failing, working at a Burger joint - not going to school equals a low paying job, which in her perception is the opposite of schooling, thus the opposite of success.

She talks about President Obama as a motivating factor in her life, but not seeing or believing there will be much change. When asked her involvement in school, she was adamant in saying she is involved, but at the moment she is not involved in any clubs or sports. She has future hopes of joining track and softball, but right now is not involved literally. Similar to Student 2, Student 3 is not literally involved in school, but expresses involvement, and links school with future success.

[Student 3] *Can you please explain your background?*

“I was born in Chicago, and my neighborhood is really nice. I live where there is no violence no gangs or anything.”

Do you live in a neighborhood of mostly Blacks?

“It’s mixed with a bunch of other nationalities.”

How long have you lived in Chicago?

“In Chicago, most of my life.”

What do your parents do?

“My mom is an accountant.”

And your dad?

“I dunno.”

So you live with your mom?

“Yes and grandma.”

Do you have brothers and sisters?

“Yes I have one brother.”

Do you think that your mom and grandma value education?

“They think that grades are important. My grandmother was a teacher, so she really likes education. And my mom she is going back to school to get her degree.”

Her bachelor's degree?

“Yes.”

So does your grandma have a degree?

“Yes, she has six degrees.”

So, you are only a freshman but how would you describe your sense of involvement in high school?

“Umm.”

Are you more academic or extracurricular focused?

“More academic focused.”

Do your grandma and mother support you in school?

“They give me extra help if I need it, they check over my homework and help me.”

How would you define the word success?

“Doing something that you like.”

So does that mean success varies between person to person?

“Yes.”

Would you describe your life as successful?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Because I am getting good grades, not failing any classes.”

So how has school played a role in your life successes and failures?

“Because I’ve had both success and failure in life. In school too.”

So give me an example.

“One time I didn’t pass a test when I was in sixth grade. And a success was when I graduated from 8th grade.”

So do you think what has influenced you more in terms of getting good grades?

“My mom and grandma.”

Do you feel like you belong in school? Do u feel like you have a place? Do you feel comfortable?

“Yes.”

Have you always felt that way in grammar and elementary school too?

“Yes.”

Do you have mentors people you know you can talk to?

“Yes.”

Do you like your teacher's?

“Yes they are nice.”

Have your feelings on schooling changed after the election of our first black Barack Obama in 2008?

“Sort of.”

How?

“Well I see if I work hard I can be president one day if I wanted to.”

Okay, so just his presence as being black has kind of motivated you or given you hope?

“Hope.”

So what bout your views on life? Have they changed after a Black president was elected?

“Yes.”

How?

“It showed me that I could be anything I wanted to be if I put my mind to it and work hard. “

How does that show you that?

“He worked hard to get the presidency.”

Do you think it's harder for Blacks to become president than a White person?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Because we [Blacks] are like a different color and in the past we have been treated poorly.”

What has influenced you to be successful more - your mom or grandma or school or Barack Obama?

“My grandma mostly.”

Why is that?

“Because she has been back to school and has degrees and had two kids and is working....”

So she was an inspiration?

“Yes.”

What would be second place?

“Barack Obama”

And school would be last why?

“I dunno.”

So what do you want to be when you grow up?

“An airplane pilot.”

Have you always wanted to be an airplane pilot?

“Yes. Ever since third grade, I read this book...I am not sure what it was called.”

Did you feel you could do that even though you are Black?

“Yes.”

Similar to Student 1 and 2, Student 3 equates success with good grades and working hard in school, his family is his number one motivator, and he sees the election of Barack Obama as a motivating factor that gives Black people hope, but does not discuss a belief in change in his life. Student 3 is one out of three student participants

who only live with one parent. His perception of his value of schooling is high. Similar to the other students, race was not brought up, until I prompted with a question about Barack Obama being Black and asking about his perception of his Blackness.

Similar to Student 2, Student 4 lives in a dangerous environment. Although Student 5 first says the block she lives on is safe, but also talks about how the surrounding blocks are frequented with gun violence. Student 4 also shares information about the dangers in his neighborhood. None of the student participants who live in areas they perceive as dangerous express their neighborhoods as a barrier to success and mobility.

Please explain your personal background?

“I grew up on the Southside of Chicago; there is a lot of gang violence.”

Who do you live with?

“My mother.”

Um, how would you describe or explain your sense of involvement in high school.

“I am doing pretty good. I am doing the best I have ever done in school.”

So what are you involved in?

“I am more in to sports then academics.”

What’s your favorite sport?

“Football.”

What’s your favorite class?

“Algebra.”

Do you feel like your family values education?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Because they want the best for us, and I know they try to push us to do our best in school.”

Did your mom graduate from high school?

“I don’t know.”

What about your dad?

“Don’t know.”

Being a freshman in high school, would you describe your life as being successful?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Because the things I did in school do not compare to what I’m doing now.”

What do you mean?

“Like in grammar school, I just did what I did to get by, now I am doing what I can do to be on top, to go to college.”

Okay, um, how would you define the word success in your own words?

“Success to me means to do your best and try your hardest and try to push yourself to do what you can do.”

So it varies person to person?

“Yes.”

Since you have been in kindergarten, how has high school played a role in your success and failures, or has it.

“It has a lot, because I know I can do it. Because I am doing good now, I just never ever showed it until now.”

What made you change?

“The fact that my mother she said high school is not going to get you by for your life. I think to myself, what am I doing in school, and how can I change it.”

So you look to the future?

“Yes.”

Have your views on schooling and education changed after the election of Barack Obama in 2008?

“Actually no, because I was planning on going to college and grad school before.”

You feel like you already had that motivation before a Black president was elected?

“Yes.”

Where did you get that motivation?

“My parents.”

Okay, have your views on life changed after the election of Barack Obama?

“Actually yes, cause it shows now that anybody can do anything that they push themselves to do.”

Why do you think that?

“Because if a man that tries so hard to become president actually, and actually made it, and is an African American...I believe I can do anything I put my mind to.”

Do you think that it was harder for Blacks to become president than White people?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Because for so long it was everybody, always downed Black people saying that they can’t do this or that, but now someone stepped up and showed them what we actually can do.”

What do you want to do when you grow up?

“Architect. I want to escape from my old life to become a new person.”

What do you mean?

“Like what you’ve done as a kid, what you’ve been involved in, you can change.”

Would you say you learned that from school or from what your parents taught you?

“Both.”

To sum things up, what is your outlook on life now that there is a black man as president?

“My outlook is now I am pushing myself to do bigger and better things for my life.”

So even before there was a black president you still wanted to go to college you still wanted to do well, but after a black president what changed?

“Well I just wanted to motivate myself even more.”

Um, and what do your parents do?

“My mother she works in a daycare center. I really don’t know what my dad does. “

Student 4 is unsure of the highest level of education that either of his parents attained yet he feels more motivated by his family--specifically his mother, than by Barack Obama's election or schooling itself. Unlike the other students, he feels that the election of 2008 has brought change, but the change he articulates is only through motivation which is similar to what the other participants said. Student 4 has a deep investment in schooling. He talks about how through schooling he can literally transform, changing and improving himself.

Similar to the other students, his success is defined by grades and hard work. When articulating his improvements in schools, getting better grades, he talks louder and seems proud of accomplishments. He understands that grades matter. Similar to Student 4 and the other student participants Student 5 links good grades to success.

Will you please explain your background, where you've lived, what it's like?

"I grew up on the Southside of Chicago and my neighborhood is not good or bad, it's just okay."

Why?

"I mean like cause they don't really do a lot of gun violence and stuff around there, I mean they get into it, but like they don't really be no harm around there."

What do you mean by get in to it?

"Gangs against gains; vice lords, Gd's and a lot more."

Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?

"No."

Who do you live with?

“I live with my grandmother, grandfather, and my mother.”

What does your mom do?

“She works at a school.”

Is she a teacher?

“No, an assistant teacher.”

And do your grandparents work?

“No.”

How would you describe your sense of involvement in high school?

“Umm.”

Are you involved do you do clubs, sports, do you focus on grades?

“I focus on my grades.”

Do you have good grades?

“Yes.”

Do you like going to class or the people.

“I like going to class because I want to get a good education.”

What class is your favorite?

“Algebra.”

Do you like your teachers?

“Yeah, I like all but two.”

Do you feel that school is important, why?

“Yes I believe it’s important because I would like to get an education and go some where.”

Do you want to go to college?

“Yes.”

What do you want to be when you grow up?

“Pediatrician or lawyer.”

How would you define the word successful?

“I think ummmm...”

Take your time.

“I can’t describe it, but ...”

Give me an example then.

What comes to your mind?

“It’s basically like achieving your goals and being what you want to be in life.

Like making sure you achieve your goals so you can be successful.”

Do you feel like school has played a role in your success and failures?

“Yes.”

How?

“Like cause there are certain classes in which you get bad grades in when the next grades come around, my grades are better than what it was the first time around.”

Does it motivate you to do better?

“Yes. That’s the word I was looking for?”

Do you feel that school plays a role in your failures?

“Ummm...”

Do you feel supported at school?

“Yes.”

How?

“Because....I can’t find the right words to say.”

Do you feel there are people here who support you?

“I think the teachers do...and other class members.”

So you like school, and you want to go to college, has that view changed since Barrack Obama has been elected?

“No. “

No? It’s been the same. You still feel the same before and after he was elected?

“They said he was going to do all these great things, but nothing has changed.”

What were you expecting?

“Like, I dunno. Like how all the gun violence is going around and young kids getting killed, and kids not getting a chance to live they life.”

Why did you think it would change?

“I just thought he was going to make a change, and he hasn’t done anything yet.”

Have your views of life changed, after a Black man was elected?

“Like in-between.”

What do you mean?

“I accept the fact that he Black now he is living for the dream like Martin Luther King, but it’s still the same, nothing has really changed.”

Do you think your getting a good education?

“Yes.”

Just for clarification, do you think your family values education?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Cause, say if I was the type of person who didn’t get a good education, or go to school, or want to be someone in life. “

So would you say your parents motivate you to do well in life?

“Yes.”

So what is your outlook on life now that Barack Obama was elected?

“Like, he probably would make a change, but it takes time to do things. And it could happen.”

Do you feel that you can achieve all of your goals?

“It’s a possibility.”

So do you believe you can achieve it more than you think you can’t?

“Yes. I think I can.”

Do you think school has helped you think that way?

Yes.

How?

“Umm.”

Student 5 is the only student who linked Barack Obama’s presidency to a historical Black figure, Martin Luther King, Jr., who also fought for change. She did not

believe Barack Obama's election has changed her perception of schooling or life. For her the realities of violence and death are proof that nothing is changing. She did articulate hope, which has been a theme, and a belief in the possibility of change. She was also the only student who did not seem completely sure about the fate of her future. She has goals, but when asked if she would achieve them, she said there was only a possibility in reaching her goals.

Out of all the participants Student 5 had the most trouble articulating her perceptions on questions. Her answers were guarded, and short. Yet her silence spoke volumes. Her reality, one of violence and guns, makes success seem like only a possibility; she unlike the others leaned on hope more than the others, as she maturely stated that it takes time to change, yet recognizing that something does need to change.

Student Collective Analysis

The students, although obviously involved in different areas, or not at all, all felt some involvement in high school. Their high school is small, with around 500 students, so it hard for a student not to feel as though they were a part of it. It is also noteworthy that, these student participants, value good grades and equate good grades with success. To them, getting good grades in school is closely linked to success and mobility. All student participants equated good grades, in some way, to their definition of success. For example, as Student 1 was talking about her grades, her voice and demeanor became more confident and proud as she talked of improved grades over the years. For Student 3, success is literally defined by doing something one likes to do, but in his example he uses grades as an indicator, he defined his success as passing eighth grade and getting

good grades. The big questions are, in the long-run do their grades matter? Are they learning? What should be more important to student's grades or learning? What are poor majority Black schools teaching their youth?

Do these Black students understand other factors that complicate social mobility, even with post-secondary education? When do you teach young Black youth, about specific hurdles ingrained in society that will inevitably affect them (Ladson-Billings, 1998)? Do we continue to motivate students based on the hope of being successful? In general, all students feel a sense of personal motivation now that there is a Black president, but during each interview there was little if any mention of race as being a motivating factor. Not until prompted was there an agreement that yes, having a Black president means something. Is their poor Black mentality that has normalized the marginalization as Blacks? A mentality where there is little question from poor Blacks themselves about inequities in school systems and society? Are many poor Blacks blind to their inferior social position?

Unlike the majority of adult participants, student participants define success based on their belief that schools are a meritocracy, that working hard within the structure of schooling can make anyone successful. They seem to buy-in to the belief that personal responsibility plays a big role in their success. In fact, they understand this better than they do inequities in individual schools, the system of schooling and society. Whether this divide is created through experiences and age, learning and knowledge, or class, there is an obvious divide between adult Blacks within this school, and Black students. Why do Black adults who have degrees and have made it through the structure

of school, and Black youth in the structure of schooling have such different views on success? Does geography, class and age influence ones mentality of schooling? Are public schools being honest and effective when they consistently perpetuate the social norms associated with being successful, including the idea of a meritocracy (Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005)?

Approximately less than twenty percent of Chicago Public School (CPS) students go to college, while less than ten percent graduate from a four year college and ninety-eight percent of the CPS student body is Black. If our Black students link success to good grades, yet are being taught an oppressive curriculum with lacking resources and little opportunity to begin with (Lipman, 2004), are we further marginalizing our Black students, and setting them up for failure? Are poor Blacks more likely to be academically disserved than non-Black students?

Comparative Analysis

As stated previously, there were a variety of trends found throughout the interviewing process. Many of these trends cross generational boundaries, being consistent across the adult and student groups, but most of the trends are only consistent within the student or adult group. This could be caused by a variety of factors including similar generational experiences, geographic location, and family structure. Nonetheless, the factors that contribute to these commonalities are not of real significance here. What is important is the perception, and the experiences lived by these Black people. Through their experiences constant reminders of the CRT tenets exist.

The five CRT tenets are threaded through the participants' voices. Those most highly discussed in this study include racism being endemic in society, social justice, voice, and challenging dominant ideas to make change. Through the participants voices this study works to understand the perceptions of Blacks who have matriculated through educational systems and those that are currently in these systems. Below race is analyzed and recognized as a contributing factor in societal inequities, hope and motivation are key as we hear the voices of those who experience these inequities, and a constant search for justice through educational opportunities is constant as dominant educational norms are questioned and challenged.

As the outcomes of this study were analyzed and trends emerged, this study produced similar results within the election of the United States' first Black President, Barack Obama. Through ten voices, voices that do not know each other, come from different parts of the United States, are of different ages and economic backgrounds speak of the motivation and sense of happiness that the actual election brought, but their perception of their life and future have yet to change. There was not a sense of pessimism, just a sense that there is a long way to go in terms of equity and race relations.

In a system ingrained with past injustices, one that recognizes yet lets those inequities persist, and one where inequities are so ingrained, its tradition allows room for discussion and question around common discourse of a meritocratic school system (Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005). Knowing that our society and the structures within, including our system of formal schooling are filled with inequities, it is interesting how the young Black people interviewed still believe in a meritocracy. Obviously the language is not

the same, but all the students interviewed felt that hard work and getting good grades was the way to success, when in fact, statistics show that hard work is only part of the way to “success,” as defined traditionally (Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005).

Interestingly, the adult participants did not feel that hard work was the key to their success. They expressed many other factors including focus, motivation, and perseverance in all things in life, not just school (Adult 4), or the caring yet “connected” people in high school and throughout college that were ladders to the Black elite and to those who could help you get where you needed to be (Adult 1). In other words, it’s not just working hard, it’s who you know. Adult 2 also discussed how there is a distinct separation between education and schooling, feeling that schooling does not always put an emphasis on learning and knowledge, and that the education aspect learned through life can help you reach the top, not necessarily schooling.

All of those interviewed, understand the importance of any type of post-secondary degree, but the adult participants understand that there is a lot more involved in being “successful” as traditionally defined, than just hard work. Schooling, as related to success, cannot be defined as black or white, it is gray in hue because of the issues of race, class, inequities and other factors that persist in our society either helping or hindering one’s social mobility (Lipman, 2004). In other words, the adult participants view schooling as a necessary vehicle defined by society to keep one on the road to success, but recognized other factors involved in success, while the student participants are encouraged that they will succeed by getting good grades and working hard.

This notion of working hard is directly related to what all the student participants articulated when asked their perception of Barack Obama and schooling. “If a man tries so hard to become president, and made it, and is an African American...I believe I can do anything I put my mind to” (Student 4). Barack Obama is a motivation to this student, but the underlying issue is that, realistically, our social structure is capitalistic in nature, and setup like the Eiffel Tower, wide at the bottom and skinny at the top (MacLeod, 1987). Unfortunately, our society is set up to have the majority of its people stay middle to lower class on the economic spectrum. The reality is, only a “few” reach the top, and unfortunately very few of those who do are Black (MacLeod, 1987).

Lastly, do these Black student participants believe they live in a school void of discrimination and racism because they are surrounded by other minorities? Lewis (2001) explores “an almost all white school” and discusses how the majority of people who attend that school work with their students under a “color-blind” ideology. In essence these teachers do not recognize that they are discriminating because they treat all children the same. Here, Lewis (2001) finds that the few “other” students taught by middle class Whites and “friends” with White peers, are marginalized because treating all students the same and ignoring racial or cultural differences is not fair, but oppressive.

Are poor Black kids, being taught with a similar ideology, only through a slightly different lens? Because this school, and most public schools in Chicago, are filled with a majority of minorities - Blacks, but still have a majority of White teachers, is there a “color-blind” mentality (Lipman, 2004)? Does this create a power dynamic in-which White teachers try to treat all poor Black students the same, when this only perpetuates

discrimination and low expectations? Whether racially categorized as Black or White, there are many cultural, racial, and individual differences within these categories (Green, 1992).

Although, when defining success, the adult participants articulated definitions related to personal goals, effort and achievement, without specifically stating schooling they all see some value in schooling. Whether it is a specific mentor, coach, bit of knowledge, or experience; there was something in school or related to school that had a positive influence on the adult participants. The student perception of success, as stated previously, is directly linked to schooling, getting good grades and working hard. Obviously the language schools use related to grades perpetuates a system of getting good grades, not necessarily learning and knowledge. For example, getting an “F” in school equates and, in some cases, stands for failure, which is the opposite of success. So, the student participants, in general, believe in the school system and its relationship to future success. The adult participants do not articulate a direct link, in their definition of success, to school, but talk about certain aspects within the school structure that benefit their success.

Adult 5 is the first in her immediate family to graduate from college. She has a job, and is happy but how much better off is she than her mother who was not allowed to go to college? Although not poor, both live on minimal means. Is this okay, does this truly define success? Adult 1, who defines herself as coming from a group of elite Blacks, starting out in a high school and community of elite Blacks, is continuing that trend. Does this truly define success if she is currently in the elite community in which

she started? Are these two scenarios surprising? Does this make one question the idea that poor Black youth are more likely to continue their family's trend of poverty, even if they work through traditional educational structures?

To get to the heart of this research, working towards getting a clearer picture of how Black Chicagoans perceived their possibility of achieving success and their opinions of schooling before and after the election of Barack Obama, it was important to understand their experiences in school and how they define success. Throughout each interview there came a point, when each participant was faced with thinking about how the role of the first Black president of the United States changed their perceptions on life, schooling, and success.

The trend among all ten participants was strongly one-sided. All of those who participated in this study said they did not feel that Barack Obama's presidential election of 2008 changed their perception on success, schooling or life. They all feel the same way about their goals and aspirations now, as they did before President Obama's election. Many of the participants felt that President's Obama election was motivating and an image of hope, but when asked if their perception of life and schooling has changed, "nothing changed" was the most common answer. All of the adults and the majority of the student participants were in disbelief that a Black man was elected and were hopeful of things to come in the future. Their perception of reality, because of personal experience, attributed to their belief that even though the Head of State is now Black, nothing has changed in their lives. This idea of hope and motivation should not be underestimated, as Blacks for centuries have persevered to find a comfortable place in a

society fill with inequities (Anderson, 1988; West, 1993). The adult participants addressed issues of race, expressing a feeling of surprise that a Black man was elected, and a sense of society moving forward. As for their perception of success as it relates to life or schooling it remained the same.

On the one hand, it is exciting to see young Black youth express motivation to become “bigger and better” because of Barack Obama’s election. However, this very idea is perpetuating the idea of a meritocracy. Working hard and getting good grades does not always equate success in a system of schooling and society that is not equitable (Snipp and Hirschman, 2005). Other than feeling a greater sense of motivation, these student participants feel that they have the same sense of mobility and opportunity than feel the same way now.”

Through the realities of these adult and student participants, it seems as though having one Black man elected as president, has not created change in their perception of life and schooling, but it has created a deeper sense of hope for the future and a motivation to put more effort into whatever each individual happens to do. Those who participated all have degrees from an institution of higher learning, so there is some belief in the structure of schooling, or else there is a belief in the *need* to follow society’s rules and get more schooling to be more marketable and “successful.” Then how does the structure of schooling play a role in those who choose to use it to become successful? Is it consistent and fair for all who use it?

Student participants would agree for the most part, they don’t feel or see a big change because of the election of Barack Obama. Some interviewed expressed a change

in belief about what Blacks are able to do, motivating them to reach their goals, but others are not so motivated, saying, “They said he was going to do all these great things, but nothing has changed” (Student 5). Others say their views haven’t changed because “I always wanted to go to college and get a job and stuff like that.” For the majority of the student participants, race was not mentioned unless specifically asked, unlike the adults who discussed much of their identity and experiences through a lens of being Black.

Adult participants were more exposed to explicit forms of discrimination, like Adult 3 being called a nigger and being asked if he had a tail, as well as the institutional racism seen through the inequities in schooling and neighborhoods. Yet our student population, although unaware, are just as exposed to institutional racism yet unaware, and because there is little racial diversity, they do not feel they are exposed to discrimination. This too creates more questions. Is society to a point where educational policy is content, and marginalized students within the structure are also content or oblivious to the status quo?

As a motivating factor, Barack Obama’s presence is inspiring. Student 1 said, “Like before, like when I was younger we had mainly White presidents, so I just thought that was their job, I thought that was mainly white people’s job...Even though African Americans go to college and stuff.” The power yet innocent undertones of an ingrained “tradition” that created a sense and belief of inferiority among Black people is present here, but President Obama’s presence breaking that myth is extraordinary. Sadly, this reality present many roadblocks for people, especially people of color because, it is not just through traditional hard work that someone excels to become president, it’s not

merely through traditional hard work that all people become successful (Snipp and Hirschmann, 2005).

Interestingly enough, many people in society, including Blacks feel that because there is a Black president, issues of race and even class have disappeared, when in reality his presence as the Head of State, cannot disintegrate all the racism that is so ingrained and explicit in our social system (West, 1983). With this comes a real fear for those already marginalized within society, especially in schooling, because it is plain to see the lack of resources and opportunities in many low income, high minority, inner city public schools, versus the abundance of opportunities and resources in private and suburban schools (Ratvich, 1983). Understanding that racism is endemic in our society, will public schools, specifically Chicago Public Schools, whose population is ninety-eight percent African American continue to oppress this demographic of learners or push to challenge the structure? CRT argues that through Black student voice, and the experience of those that came before, society can now start to question the inequities that exist so to create momentum for change. We must continually question dominant discourse and standards so to move towards a more equitable system (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lipman, 2004).

Will society continue to move forward, in educational reform, so to lessen the inequities between Blacks and Whites in school, and in the work place? Will it require a policy change, to provide resources to our most underfunded, underserved, an under-academically challenged public schools, so that more Black students are exposed to their right to an education? Participants in this study articulated no change in the perception of their future or their successes because Barack Obama is president. However, there is a

sense of personal motivation and accountability in working hard; but again, does this not reinforce the idea of a merit based system, when in reality other structural factors make it impossible to create an equitable system? This includes the very fabric of our capitalist society, which was threaded with a history of racism and bias (Anderson, 1988). This speaks to many of the CRT tenets, racism is inherent and does effect many of our nations systems, including education.

Other trends within this research are the role of the family. All the adult and student participants expressed having at least one person within their immediate family, or someone close to them that was and still is, in many cases, a constant motivation in being successful at school and in life. As discussed previously, schooling is not the only factor in a successful life, but it is believed to be a necessary ingredient in some sort of success, and all the participants expressed family being a constant inspiration on that road.

Family influence and support; even from those family members who may not have a college degree, or even a high school degree, was motivating to both student and adult participants. With family being a large motivating factor for student participants to be successful through hard work and grades in school, even if they themselves have not graduated from high school or college, makes one question whether family is another factor perpetuating a societal belief in our meritocratic system or the driving force behind keeping kids in school, or both? At what point do Black youth need to know the inequities ingrained in our school and social system, and the odds against them? How do

we teach the realities of our unfair society, yet continue to motivate both students and their families?

Out of the five student participants, looking at both the father and mother's highest level of education (out of 10 parents), two have high school diplomas, two graduated from college, one has a Master's degree, and five of the parents highest level of education is unknown. Student 3 lives with his grandmother who has six degrees. The level of these degrees is unknown. Out of the adult participants, four parents have a high school diploma, three have a college degree, two have some college, one has an associate's degree, and one parent's educational information was unknown. In general, the family members who are involved in the interviewed participant's lives have less college education, and more high school.

This creates more questions: What motivates others to motivate others to work hard in school, when they themselves, on average, did not attend college or any type of secondary schooling? This research makes it clear, that there is not any disdain for furthering ones education, yet so many Blacks do not graduate from high school, or further their education past high school if they do (Bell, 1987). President Barack Obama, although extremely educated, is not, according to this study, changing Black perception of education. He seems to be a mere image, to many, especially the youth participants. How do we implement change to a structure that is inequitably solidified?

Interviewing Blacks, and listening to their voice is important in understanding the need for recreating an educational system where all are taught with the prospect of equal opportunity in post-secondary options, and in the workforce. It is clear for the

participants of this study that having a Black president is motivating. However, that motivation has not changed an oppressive and inequitable social system (West, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Despite a belief in the lack of external changes, each participant in this study was internally changed by the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama. So although, participants explained that the election of Barack Obama was historic and motivating, they also said that nothing has changed. Fortunately, personal motivation leads to hope, which leads to action, and, often times action leads to positive and collective change.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your background. Describe how your childhood is/was, and tell me about your family.
2. What is the highest level of education that your parents have?
3. What do you believe is the purpose of schooling?
4. Please explain any involvement in your formal schooling experience.
5. Did/Do you feel a part of your schooling experience?
6. In your own words, define the word success.
7. Are you successful, based on your own definition of success?
8. Has your perception of life changed after the election of the first Black President Barack Obama in 2008? Explain.
9. Has your perception of schooling changed after the election of the first Black President Barack Obama was elected in 2008? Explain
10. Describe your outlook on life now that there is a Black president.

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VITA

Lydia Young was born in Pueblo, Colorado, but lived most of her life in Kansas. After graduating from high school in Lawrence, Kansas, she chose to attend the University of Kansas. Lydia received a scholarship to be a part of a multicultural teacher's organization, to help support the needs of marginalized students. Here, she began reading theories on inequities in school systems. Her passion for educational opportunity for all began to grow. There, she received her bachelor's degree in Secondary Education with an emphasis in History. Her true passion is Black history, focusing on policy and structural inequities that affect Blacks and other minorities. After graduating from the University of Kansas, she received the Kansas Teacher of Promise Award. From there she began her teaching career.

After teaching World History for one year in Topeka, Kansas, she decided that she wanted to continue studying structures of education so to help change and create policy. Lydia realized that there were inequities in schooling systems, and decided to continue studying so to make system change. In June of 2006, Lydia moved to Chicago, Illinois to attend Loyola University Chicago. There she began the Cultural Education and Social Policy Master's program. Here, she focused on sociology, learning the systems of our global and local societies. Her passion grew as she began teaching again at a Southside high school in Chicago.

More than ever she wants to continue studying schooling systems, and the factors that create barriers to mobility. She believes through making a more equitable schooling recognizing many of the unfair systems in and out of schools, there will be more success among marginalized groups.

THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Director's Signature